

Remembrance Day 2008

If you're anything like me, you'll have confused attitudes today. These might include

- an inexplicable feeling of national pride and loyalty.
- recollection of the camaraderie that bad times can bring – it's understandable that people feel that the war years were the best of their lives.
- embarrassment that we're raking over the past, and keeping open the wounds.
- shame that we might be thought to be revelling in warfare.

Whatever might be buried away in our minds, we're here to recall those who have died in what is called the service of their country. Those who obeyed orders. And let's not restrict this to the two world wars of the 20th centuries. Women and men have died in Korea, Balkans, Falklands, Cyprus, Middle East, Egypt, Africa, Ireland. And now Iraq, Afghanistan: where a poppy has a different meaning, altogether more sinister.

I've never fought in armed conflict, nor am I likely to. I am one of the post-war children whose life has been privileged ... But I've come to appreciate the nastiness of war. We sometimes choose to sanitise war by thinking of the dead: it is easier. We don't have to provide medical care for the dead like we do for the maimed. We don't have to worry about the lacerations, the amputations, the psychological effects (NI – jumped when cap gun went off – hid under benches.)

It was a woman of Derbyshire who first moved me, someone who lost boyfriend, brother, friends, So let's remember too the bereaved, the Vera Brittains, the mothers, fathers, lovers, friends; those who were not killed but maimed. Behind today's ritual and ceremonial there are countless stories of real human tragedy.

Later in this service we'll be demanding that God grants us peace. Do we think that by repeating this a few times, there'll be some magical transformation, that the magic incantation will change the physical world and the thoughts and instincts of mankind? Surely we can only expect peace if first there is justice. After all, it is a tenet of our religion that we must oppose injustice. Fight for justice first, then peace will come.

Does this mean I'm just about to mix religion and politics, to preach politics from the pulpit? I do hope so. William Temple.

Perhaps it is we who need to change. No—not perhaps, but definitely.

Let's **remember** the arrogance and pride of warmongers who think that they will look bigger and better if they thump someone. Let's remember those who feel that their attitudes and ways of doing things are worth imposing on everyone else. And the English have been very good at that over the years, imposing their will on Ireland, Wales, Palestine, Cyprus, India and Pakistan, to say nothing of current exploits.

We are all warmongers on a small scale: we vow to repay those who do us wrong in small things, minor things, we think we need to get the better of someone at Scrabble—yes, this is the same instinct—or win petty arguments. And I am no better than you. As mammals, apes, we need these instincts for survival, but what we do with them is a matter of the greatest importance. And that is why we must not stop at remembering. That's why I'm giving you two more R words today, making three in all. Remember, release, resolve.

We've considered the first of these, remember, so now **the second: release**. We have to learn to let go of the past, but that does not mean forgetting it. And it doesn't necessarily mean forgiving either. Maybe we have to carry the grief with us. Just a looser grip – a recognition that we can not change the past. If we don't loosen our grip on hurts from the past, the loads get bigger and heavier, and weigh us down more and more, and they will drag us into the depths of the underworld. Bringing the past to the present can help us to loosen our grip on it. Look at the risen Christ with his wounds. It's the wounds—the hurts of the past—that do the work. It is remembrance of past mistakes and a resolution to avoid their repetition that fuels our determination not to repeat them.

And now the third R word: resolve

How are we to conduct ourselves if we want to make Remembrance Sundays truly worthy of the notion that tomorrow will be better?

The two readings tell us all we need to hear.

Micah. The Old Testament prophets were not comfortable people to have around. They were not polite, they were forthright and charmless. They cared nothing for manners and courtesy: they told it like it was. That is what prophets are like.

Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with the Lord. Know your strengths and weaknesses, and do nothing to impose on others.

And how do we walk humbly? Read the second lesson. You may be more familiar with it in another translation (one that frankly rather perplexes me) but this translation, when I first read it, quite bowled me over, and still does, even after repeated readings and hearings.

That is how we become pure in heart: *valere*, to be of good heart. Valiant - as we soon sing the hymn that always moves me with a confusion of these emotions: O Valiant Hearts.

Remember, release, resolve

Today we remember those who have put the needs and lives of others before their own. Their sacrifice demands more than just remembrance. It demands that we resolve to strive for peace by fighting for justice and loving our neighbour whatever their race or colour or creed. Love your neighbour as yourself.