

The Thirty-second Sunday of the Year (Remembrance Sunday)

We talk a lot about remembering...

Remember to put your coat on if you go outside, we tell our children.

Remember your mum's birthday, we tell our spouses.

Remember that time when we went to Blackpool, we joke with our friends.

This week, we've said "Remember, remember the 5th of November".

In church at communion we hear, "Do this in remembrance of me".

And today, the solemn moment, "We will remember them".

What does remembering mean to you? On one level, remembering is simply and profoundly a calling to mind. On this day in particular, we gather to call to mind those who have died for their country in war.

They might be those we knew, those we loved. For the younger among us they might be those figures from our family histories whose stories we have heard. They might be men and women from our local community who died in the wars of the last century, as well as those who have died in the recent conflict in Iraq or who are risking their lives there, or elsewhere in the world, on our behalf today.

To remember these people, ordinary people like us, who made the extraordinary sacrifice of their lives, is to honour them. It is to respect them, and those they left behind. And it is to be grateful to them. But it is more than that. To remember them is to make them and their sacrifice real to us. It is to flesh out the well-rehearsed facts of the war against fascism or the war against terrorism, by putting in real names and real faces. It is to replace dry history with living stories.

For me, this sort of remembering means war stops simply being something that's happening out there, or happened back then, and brings it home. You will have your own stories, the people you remember, some of whom are perhaps commemorated by plaques on the walls of our churches or at the war memorial in the churchyard.

The word re-member, taken literally, has this sense of putting flesh onto history. Literally remembering, putting the members of the body together again so that the pain and the heroism and the suffering of war, undergone by real people, is brought close to us and prompts our gratitude and respect. Remembering does more than this.

As remembrance brings us closer to the people who died for us in war, so things fall into their proper perspective. We realise that we are not and never have been in full control of our own destinies, and that the good things we have and enjoy are not entirely of our own making.

The freedom to live in peace and justice and democracy is a gift, a gift made possible by the sacrifices of others in the past. It is this gift of peace, which we enjoy, that helps us resolve the tension between honouring the glorious sacrifices made in war and yet abhorring war itself. The sacrifices were made so that we might live in peace.

This remembering of sacrifices made so that we might live in peace is also at the heart of what we do in church. Christians believe that God took upon himself the world's pain, bearing in the body of Jesus on the cross the brunt of the anger and violence humans are capable of. His willing sacrifice of his life, mirrored by many down the years, was made so that we now can live in peace with God and with each other.

In this way remembering works its magic. We remember; the sacrifice becomes real, and we experience thankfulness and humility.

This in turn makes it more likely that we in our turn will be willing to make sacrifices, not necessarily with our lives, but in whatever small ways we can, on behalf of others, to live our lives for others as well as for ourselves, to make the ultimate gesture of respect and remembrance which is to carry forward the legacy of justice and peace.

So today, on Remembrance Sunday, remembering means to honour those men and women who have died in war; and it means making their stories real.

This day we remember their solemn sacrifice, and the obligation it lays on us to live for others and pursue the gift of peace.