

How do we remember?

Sermon to the diocese of Guildford for Remembrance Sunday, 8th November 2020 from Bishop Jo

1 Thess 4:13-18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died

Remembrance is all about making sure we're not uninformed about those who have died. In particular those who've died at war. Rather we're informed, and present to the memory, even of people we cannot name yet through whose legacy we live. Today we remember especially those who died in the 'war to end all wars'. It may have lasted just four years and taken place over a relatively small patch of land in Flanders but the names of those who died would make this sermon last nearly a year if I did nothing but read them out.

We also remember those who died twenty years later in the Second World War, the war that introduced the concept of Total War. Whereas in WW1, the battles were chiefly confined to the front lines of opposing armies, by the Second World War anywhere could be the frontline, with wholesale devastation from the air of towns and cities and their civilian populations - people in their homes, in the workplace, people at rest and play. Women and children joined the listings of war-dead en masse, and on all sides of the conflict. We remember them.

And so we honour those who laid down their lives for their country. And we grieve for those caught up who never chose to be involved, the co-lateral damage in a world where warfare continues. *We do not want to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died* - whether those who died at the battle of the Somme or those who died in the workcamp of Auschwitz or those who died in the air-raid shelters of Coventry or Dresden. Or those who've died as migrants escaping the present-day warzones that were their homes.

In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul is urging that we don't hide from the hard work of grief or remembrance, even when we can't make sense of it and it is very heavy. The pastoral situation there was very different from ours today but the weight of grief and the

hunger for hope surely is not. To meet their concern Paul paints a picture of Christ's return, in the most vivid language possible, to help the recipients of the letter have the sense that they can actually see, hear, and trust the salvation they are risking their lives on... to build their patience and resilience in times that might otherwise feel meaningless and anxious. Our times are not purposeless: there *is* direction and an end point, in Christ's longed-for return. Glimpse the big picture, he says as he stretches out the canvas before the eyes of their hearts.

And so Paul describes heaven and earth as suddenly and beautifully reconciled in an embrace ("caught up together") - I wonder if, with the eyes of your heart you can feel yourself held within that embrace. It takes place in some newly opened space between heaven and earth ("in the air") and it's an embrace that will never end ("and so we will be with the Lord forever"). That image sums up Paul's deepest beliefs about God's reconciling purpose in Christ - a purpose clear enough to sustain Paul through prison and persecution, a purpose sure enough to bring faithful servicemen and women to lay down their lives, a purpose strong enough to carry us through the current trials of pandemic and political pandemonium.

When we speak of Christ's return Paul is not talking about some wistful dream that God might send Jesus a second time just as he did the first time. Given how long it has been since the 'first coming', there's probably a danger that after two thousand years Christian hope seems fruitless or delusional. No, Paul is saying anything BUT that - quite the opposite. He's demarcating the space, he's clarifying the direction of travel, and so he's redescribing what may sometimes *feel* like a wild and war-torn wilderness so we may inhabit it for what it is: more like an electro-magnetically-charged field of salvation between the poles of Christ's first and second appearance.

The promised appearance of Christ aligns us and charges us - just as with the earliest Gentile Christians - to come into right relationship with God and with one another. The experience of the Spirit of God at work empowers us to work for righteousness and justice, to live in holiness and love, to risk reconciliation even when violence threatens. The world wars of the past have been attempts to achieve peace, yet we know such peace is temporary and tenuous; it is fragile and fallible. And yet we know there will be a day when wars will end, when reconciliation will be sealed, when salvation is the whole of it.

And so, based on that future confidence, Paul urges us to live now in the light of that security: to live into your partnership with Christ today. This isn't just about an imagined future: it's about Christ's work of transformation in you, and through you to your community, *today*. He addresses we who are alive: not to feel guilty, not to waste our lives, not to look back with regret; but to live within the reality of the cosmic embrace. Now.

Not least in the way that we mourn. In the way that we grieve. In the way that we remember.

How do we remember? I want to finish with the story of how our present practice of Remembrance began.

In 1914, a twenty-five-year-old South African named Percy Fitzpatrick, a former student at Oxford, was studying to be a lawyer in London. At the outbreak of war in July that year he returned home to Johannesburg and volunteered for military service. In September 1915, Fitzpatrick returned to England with the South African Heavy Artillery. He saw service at some of the most ferocious battles of the war, including the Battle of the Somme and the third Battle of Ypres. He commanded the 71st siege battery of the South African Heavy Artillery for around nine months. On 14th December 1917, FitzPatrick, now an acting Major, was nearing the railway station at Beaumetz in north east France to say farewell to

two friends who were going on leave to England. A chance shell, fired at long range, struck. FitzPatrick was killed, aged 28. His father, Sir Percy FitzPatrick senior, a farmer and former Mayor of Johannesburg, had lost his eldest son. He planted memorial trees on his land, but then wanted to do more. He'd been impressed by a one-minute silence kept in his local church in 1916 after the South African casualty list had been read out. The date and time of the Armistice - the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month - inspired Sir Percy FitzPatrick to suggest an annual commemoration. The suggestion was forwarded to King George V and the King issued a 'call to the nation' at the beginning of November 1919 asking that, 'for the brief space of two minutes, there be a complete suspension of all normal activities...to perpetuate the memory of the Great Deliverance, and of those who laid down their lives to achieve it.' - the first minute's silence intended as a thanksgiving for those who have survived, and the second minute to remember the fallen. And so, on 11th November 1919, the Armistice Day silence was officially observed for the first time.

How do we remember? We continue the tradition that began with Percy Fitzpatrick Sr as fervently as ever nearly a century later. We may gather at memorials - even though it's not so easy this year. We may plant trees. We may read out the names off the board at school or out of the book in our church. *To be informed, as brothers and sisters, about those who have died...* And at the same time, for we who are alive, we remember by claiming fully the life for which they died, the life which, despite all circumstances, is caught up in the cosmic embrace of heaven and earth, the everlasting arms, circumscribed in time and space by the first coming at Christ and his promised return. And so we live with a hope that is firm, we dwell secure, we know God's salvation. And so we may give thanks even as we grieve. And so we may live the hope of Christ in a world that is otherwise hope-less. Because, we may be clear, Jesus will return; salvation is secure; the future is bigger and better - and far longer! - than the past.