

Remembrance Sunday 2021

St Luke's, Tutshill

Genesis 4:8-15; Mark 13:1-8

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Binyon's great poem, "For the Fallen", lines from which will be used all across the world today, begins:

"With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea..."

And when people ask me about Remembrance Sunday, I often want to say something about "proud thanksgiving". About looking back with proud thanksgiving. Looking back of course to terrible conflict, to lives shattered and lives laid down, but also to valour in the cause of something greater.

I want to talk about pride; and about sorrow also. We remember, proudly, but sorrowfully. This is not triumphalism. It's honest recognition of an extraordinary sacrifice which, God willing, none of us will be called upon in our age to offer, but which men and women the world over are offering today. The number of British service men and women killed in the Afghanistan campaign was 457.

We are provoked to ask ourselves about war, and conflict. About peace and valour, about identity, nation and freedom.

The theological challenge around what is going on when human beings kill each other in the context of war is immense. The

questions, and the answers, run the risk of being over-simplistic, or immensely complicated.

I am still technically a Cadet forces chaplain. And I often tell the story of sitting, probably ten years ago now with a group of junior cadets as we explored the symbol of the poppy. In a remarkably moving moment a 10 year old girl read aloud to the rest of the group John McCrae's poem, "In Flanders Fields". She finished reading, paused for a moment, and then began pondering on the meaning of the line: "If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep though poppies grow in Flanders fields". The profundity of her reaction was humbling. 'This is really complicated', she said.

It is really complicated. Remembrance Sunday is probably the most complicated Sunday of the year for Christians. We bring a bundle of reactions together, some of which are theological, some ideological, some emotional.

'They must have been so brave', the young cadet reflected. And then, in the next breath, 'What does God think, Padre?'

I said, I think God thinks they were brave, too.

I included the story of Cain and Abel this morning because it illustrates the way in which this is not straightforward. It's not a story about war, or course. But it is the bible's first account of a human being killing another human being. But so much is left unsaid. We don't know why God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's, which is Cain's motivation for killing Abel in the first place. Anger, or jealousy, or resentment, or that deadliest of sins, pride, cause Cain to murder his brother. And God notices:

"What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground."

And God's reaction to this act is both to curse and to protect Cain. There is, even in the heart of this dark story, this parable of the depths to which humanity can sink in its worst moments, when desire for power, when greed or jealousy or broken and twisted relationships close our ears to the song of the angels, and "man at war with man hears not the love song" of peace, yet that love song goes on.

And in our better moments we *do* hear the love song. In our better moments we *do* stand up to protect the weaker person. In our greatest moments we can be noble.

That young cadet was spot on, I think, when she said, "I think they were very brave", and then asked the question about God. On Remembrance Sunday we do both those things, together – another of those paradoxes of our faith. We at one and the same time recognise that amongst all the complexity of the rights or wrongs of war and conflict, what we see is immense bravery, sacrifice and selflessness. And we honour that.

And then we ask our questions. And probably here, this morning. That's enough. We ask the questions. We lay them at the foot of the cross, with our wreaths of poppies, and we pray them into the mystery of God's love.

We ask the questions, and we hold the complexity in prayer, and before the altar of a God whose faithfulness is made known in sacrifice and suffering.

We need to be a people who think. A community who recognises complexity, and paradox. That is part of how we honour the past. That is a vital part of remembering.

'In proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children
England mourns for her dead across the sea'.

But the goal of the pride and the thanksgiving, the remembrance, is that at the going down of the sun and in the morning, as we remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives, as we remember *them* we remember who we are, and why it matters that we keep asking the questions.

And so the two themes, pride and sorrow, mingle, as the words of Genesis mingle with the words of the liturgy: "What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground." "At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them".

We hold in tension a sorrow that although we are a whole family of humanity, yet "man at war with man hears not the love-song" of peace. We repent of that, and we pray, hard, that war may cease, and that peace may reign. But at the same time we give thanks that when those times arise when for the safety, security and flourishing of humanity someone must stand up to defend the principles on which our society is founded, there were men and women in the past, their names graven into our hearts as well as into the stones of our war memorials, just as there are men and women today, who will give their tomorrows.

Amen.