

Remembrance Sunday Sermon – 11th November 2018

When is it, I wonder, that our life experiences become history?

I remember my sister's excitement when she started learning about the Vietnam War as part of her GCSE history studies. And my mum was a little less excited, telling us that it had happened during her childhood and didn't feel like history to her. As a history teacher myself, I had a similar experience, finding myself teaching about the fall of the Berlin Wall to children born long after the event, knowing that for me it formed a significant part of my childhood memories.

I don't know whether you enjoy history. In the conversations I have had, it seems to be something that becomes more interesting to us as we get older, though there are plenty of exceptions. When I was teaching, there was always a pressure to justify the importance of your subject. No one doubted that children needed to learn English and Maths, but almost everything else was up for grabs. One of the arguments people tried to make was that by learning history we can avoid the mistakes of the past. The problem is that human beings seem rather capable of repeating past mistakes. And of course no two situations are ever the same, so the process of working out what lessons we might learn is complicated in itself.

Those of you who studied history a long time ago will be familiar with learning dates and events. There was a feeling that we needed to have some kind of knowledge about key events in our history as part of our general knowledge. The focus has shifted over time. While the shelves in Waterstones will tell us that there is still an appetite for learning about wars, battles and military strategy, the school curriculum is more likely to include social, political and economic history. Perhaps the hope is that by understanding the broader forces at work, we will avoid the need for a good military strategy. There has also been a desire over time to reclaim history for everyone. To learn about the experiences of the individuals from all parts of society. So our studies of the First World War now include individuals executed for cowardice; details of the conditions in the trenches; consideration of experiences back home; the reality of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, among other things.

So where does Remembrance Sunday fit in?

Of course we all know the history. Remembrance Day is observed on 11th November because of the armistice signed bringing hostilities to an end at 11 am on 11th November 1918 – one hundred years ago today. The poppy was first worn in 1921. Poppies had covered the fields in Flanders, so this seemed an appropriate symbol of remembrance. There is something extraordinary about a field of poppies – the glorious bright red goes on forever, yet each individual flower is so delicate, not able to last more than a day if picked. Many of you will recall the extraordinary display of ceramic poppies at the Tower of London a couple of years ago, cascading out of the tower and pouring into the moat. Again, there is something so powerful about the impact of so many flowers, yet the individuality of each separate bloom.

While the origin of Remembrance Sunday lies in the end of the First World War, its meaning has evolved over time. It has not been confined to one conflict, but rather we have incorporated remembrance of subsequent conflicts in the one act of remembrance. Today we think of our armed forces currently serving across the world, too. An act of remembrance is an occasion to see our present in a different light. And as you will see as we come towards the end of the service, it is also an opportunity to respond with hope and commitment. To dare to look towards a better future –

and to commit ourselves to working for that. It's one of the reasons that it is so important for us today that our uniformed organisations form a part of our service. Our future is in the hands of these young people, and we pray that they might be wise in the ways that they shape that future.

The word remember is about recalling things and bringing them to mind. But I also like the way that the word can be broken down as re-member. For me there is a sense in re-membering of bringing together broken parts in order to make a coherent whole. On Remembrance Sunday, we bring together the past, the present and the future in the hope of making a more coherent whole. We can none of us make sense of our own life without understanding its place in relation to what has happened in the past. We are shaped by the events of the past, whether or not they have affected us directly. And of course some events have taken on such significance that we recognise them formally nationally and indeed internationally.

But if we are shaped by the past, our lives also look towards the future. I remember as a teenager having conversations with my friends in which we decided that we were going to make a much better job of life than our parents had – first and foremost, of course, we would be better parents, certainly less strict. There are many mantras that remind us of the importance of the present, but part of what makes us human is our recognition that what we do today will have an impact on generations to come.

The concept of story can be a helpful one. There is a sense in which we all understand our lives as having the kind of shape and features we find in a story – a beginning, middle and end – a past, present and future. The richest stories will not shy away from the influences of past, nor the possibilities of the future.

Perhaps that is part of the reason why the Church is such a fitting venue for acts of remembrance. In a very different context, I was speaking last week of the stories held within the walls of this building. In the eternal nature of God, we recognise that while the world is always changing, the presence of God is a constancy on which we can rely.

Remembrance Sunday this year has a particular significance, as we remember the centenary of the end of the First World War. The significance of this season of remembrance will continue beyond these centenary commemorations, though. Remembrance has become a part of our identity, helping us to look towards the future, daring to hope that it might be more peaceful, while recognising that we have been shaped as a nation and a people by events of the past. And knowing that we are held in God's love always.

Amen