

Sometimes when people are getting towards the end of their lives they find it difficult to remember things. They forget where they put things. My grandmother often asked me if I'd seen her glasses anywhere, to which I'd have to reply: 'I can see them now: you're wearing them.'

Incidents like that are amusing, but much more serious is the distress people experience when they can't remember who people are in their families, or where they are. What should be so familiar seems very strange, and people who have problems with their memory feel very frightened by it.

Why is memory so important? The answer is because without memory we are totally lost; we lose our sense of identity; we lose our history, which means we cannot learn from the past.

That is why today is so very important. Today is the day on which we remember. We remember our history, the history of the world. Sometimes we have moments of celebration, such as Christmas and Easter, when we remember good things that have happened. But sometimes, like today, we must remember things that are not so good: today we remember the horrors of war. We remember all those people who have suffered in wars. And we try to draw lessons from those memories.

A man who survived Auschwitz, said that the Holocaust was not a Jewish problem it was a human problem. He said that his life was devoted to memory, to keeping the picture alive so that we as a race would never repeat it. In 1960 this man Ellie Wiesel wrote in a book about Auschwitz called Night:

'Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget those flames, which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments, which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.'

We need the memory of witnesses. I am fascinated by the stories of my parents' childhood. My mother and her family were bombed out of their home in Birmingham when she was a young child. She clearly remembers that the fire watchman was standing at the end of the entry to her home when the bomb fell two doors down and his head was blown off. She was evacuated to Reading, where she started school, only to be bombed out again, whereupon the family moved back to Birmingham.

Fascinated as I am by these memories, I am grateful that I was not there, and even more grateful that I have never been called upon to fight in a war. Some of you listening today may have been around during the Second World War and some of you may have fought in it. That war is part of your own personal histories. To you we say a sincere thank you; we are only here in comparative peace and prosperity because of you and we must never forget that.

We also need to remember how truly awful war is. War is not glorious, it is not a game, and through it inevitably many innocent people suffer. But more than that. By remembering people who have died during a war we remind ourselves of what we might call the human condition: human beings sadly appear to be unable to sort out their differences without

sometimes resorting to war. And we know that that is not God's way. He does not wish us to sort out our differences by fighting. Taking up arms is not of itself a Christian act; it is only justified if we have absolutely no alternative as a means of defending ourselves.

The Christian way is the way of peace, or to be precise, peacemaking. 'Blessed are the peacemakers,' proclaimed Jesus. This means that we must learn lessons from history, learn from our mistakes; we must try to establish ways of avoiding war and promoting peace. That is why it was good that after the Second World War the United Nations was established and, along with it, International Courts of Justice to deal with people responsible for committing atrocities in wartime. This is peacemaking because it furthers the cause of justice, it promotes the kingdom of God.

We remember at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month because that was when the First World War ended. How sad it is to read and hear about that war. So many men volunteered to join enthusiastically, full of hope, full of patriotism, full of expectation, led to believe that the British forces were so obviously superior that the war would probably be over by Christmas – Christmas 1914. That war lasted four years and very many of those who volunteered never came back. A whole generation was in effect wiped out. The world became a very different place. Not only did virtually every family lose someone in the war, but something even more precious was lost: many people lost their ability to trust other human beings and many lost their faith in God.

The Revd G. A. Studdert Kennedy, better known as Woodbine Willie, was a padre serving in the First World War. He wrote many poems, *Rough Rhymes of a Padre*. Here is one of them:

There's a soul in the Eternal,
 Standing stiff before the King.
There's a little English maiden
 Sorrowing.
There's a proud and tearless woman,
 Seeing pictures in the fire.
There's a broken battered body
 On the wire.

There are wars at this moment. There are bombs exploding, shooting, and people being killed. Today we are anaesthetised from the suffering because it is all so distant. But war is always about suffering. We should never be enthusiastic about war. Rather we must ask ourselves how and why these current conflicts started. It is easy to blame individuals, but why is there such a depth of antagonism, such hostility, between people of the world?

On this Remembrance Day I would like us all to remember one thing: at the heart of Christian remembering is a God who became flesh and blood, a God who himself was the victim of violence, the most extreme violence imaginable. This God chose to die for us, chose to die in the struggle for peace. This God, Jesus, was describing himself when he said 'blessed are the peacemakers.'

Christians commit themselves to modelling their lives on Christ, so we who call ourselves Christians must do everything in our power to be peacemakers. We must try to sort out our differences without resorting to violence wherever we live, or work, or study. We must do all we can to live in peace and harmony with other people in the community, whatever their backgrounds, whatever their race, culture or religion.

8.11.2020

Remembrance, St John's online

And we must pray especially at this time for world leaders that they may actively pursue peace and an end to all violence, wherever it comes from. That has to be the Christian way. For Jesus tells us: 'blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be the children of God.'

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