

# Sunday 9 November 2008: Remembrance Sunday

## Remembering

**Readings: 1 Thessalonians 4.13-end; Matthew 25.1-13**

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

*Wilfred Owen*

Anthem for Doomed Youth was written by Wilfred Owen in 1917 when he was a patient at Craiglockhart Hospital while he was recovering from shell shock. A year later returning to the front-line, Wilfred Owen was to die in battle seven days before the armistice. In this poem Wilfred Owen uses the imagery and ritual of a funeral service to painfully contrast the terror and brutality of the front line - the bells have become the monstrous anger of guns, no prayers, the only choir the demented choirs of wailing shells, and bugles calling them home. An anthem is a song or hymn of celebration but the anthem of doomed youth has become a song of loss and futility. The poem moves from infernal noise to mournful silence. It is as though the poem moves into darkness. There is no celebration of death here, just the knowledge of the pain it causes, the grief of those who remember and wait "and each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds." It was customary if there was a death in the house to pull down the blinds. It is an image of loneliness and dislocation. Shutting out the world, trapping the griever in darkness. Loss and grief have become a hidden private thing. Hidden behind blinds... a turning inwards, a shutting out, a putting out of the light.

For Owen this is war's end. The celebration of the parting as the soldiers set off to defend King and country only a distant memory of a vision now irrecoverably broken. The result of war is broken and damaged lives hidden behind the façade those who grieve pull down to hide their pain. We have seen it too often on the news, another fatality in Hellmand Province Afghanistan or Iraq, or Palestine or the Congo: another bereaved family, they are held before the camera for an instant as we witness a snap shot of their tragedy and then the camera turns away and leaves them to their lives of grief.

When the BBC journalist Alan Johnston came to St Martin's to talk about his experiences in Gaza he quoted Woodward and Bernstein, of Watergate fame, saying that good journalism, good witness is about shining the light on events and situations which are taking place in our world - shining the light - not making judgements but allowing light in so that people can make judgements for themselves.

Today is Remembrance Sunday, the day we remember all those living and dead who served in the armed forces and those who lost their lives. It is a day when we shine the light both on human courage and self-offering which have brought protection and peace and also shine a light on the terrible, terrible cost of war and the grief and loss it brings. This day was originally known as Armistice Day because 11 o'clock on 11 November 1918 marks the signing of the armistice at the end of the First World War, said to be the war to end all wars. On the 12 November 1919 the Manchester Guardian reported on the first two minute silence in London:

The first stroke of 11 produced a magical effect. The tram cars glided into stillness, motors ceased to cough and fume and stopped dead, horses too as though they knew - someone took off their hat with nervous hesitancy, the rest of the men bowed their heads also. Here and there a soldier could be seen slipping into the posture of attention. An elderly woman, not far from me wiped her eyes, the man beside her looked white and stern. Everyone stood very still.... The hush deepened. It had spread across the whole city and became so pronounced as to impress one with a sense of audibility. It was a silence which was almost pain. And the spirit of memory brooded over it all.

This spirit of memory is not a tearful nostalgia for past glory. It is quite the opposite: it is a remembering of the costliness of war and the devastation it causes. This spirit of memory is both the recognition of all lives lost and damaged by the evil of war but also a recognition of the meaning of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of peace for which we long, where every tear is wiped away and death will be no more and mourning and crying will be no more. The symbol of this kingdom is a bloodstained lamb, a slaughtered lamb, one who was innocent and gentle, and put to death for the sins of his people and yet lives on.

Our Gospel today is the story of ten bridesmaids: five of them foolish, five of them wise. On the surface it seems rather a lightweight story to have any application to today's theme of Remembrance. The foolish bridesmaids seem guilty of nothing more than a little foolish negligence. And at first sight it is the wise bridesmaids who seem worse - selfish in their failure to help the five who have forgotten to bring oil for their lamps. And more confusing still, the consequence of their forgetfulness seems so much greater than their small failure for the bridegroom shuts them out of the banquet and refuses to recognise them "I tell you I do not know you!" It seems an over-reaction. But let us think again. What about if you were entrusted to prepare a wedding for those who loved you most and when the time came you were simply not there for them? You just hadn't been bothered to get ready, couldn't be bothered to get out of bed, prepare, be on time. It may seem peripheral in the scale of things but what does it say about our love? When you really love someone and they are away from you don't you really wait for them, hope for them, fear for them, want to be there for them when they return? What about if this wedding banquet is not just a banquet but the kingdom we long for - a kingdom in which we are called into a relationship with God and one another? What about if we just couldn't be bothered? What about if we really are, as we are told over and over again, called to be bearers of the light and that light is the light of peace and justice, the light of love and forgiveness and unity and joy? And what about if we let that light go out? - too apathetic, or caught up in our own concerns to remember to hold on to the light... what would that mean? And what about if that bridegroom was one who had loved us so much that he had given his whole life for us and then when he returned we were so 'not bothered' we had just let all the lights go out?

I think it could be a little bit like sending off someone to the front line and then forgetting to welcome them home. It could be a bit like letting someone die for you and then simply

turning away. Human life is too sacred, it is of God and their offering too great. Can we simply shut our eyes and go to sleep and forget the coffins returning from Afghanistan? Can a nation send its army to war and then abandon it when it returns wounded? Can we turn off the pictures of the Congo, sleep while our world is destroyed for future generations, shut our eyes to the number of members of our armed forces who end up homeless, abandon any vision of justice and peace? There are some things and people we need to remember, there are some things we simply have to be awake for, even ready to give our lives for. Today's Gospel reading is a call to costly remembering. It is also a warning that there comes a time for all of us when time runs out and we need to choose whether we are prepared to keep the light burning. The pain of war should not lead to a drawing down of blinds but opening up to let in the light of truth both on the tragedy but also upon the promise of the peace of God which requires us all in the making.

And today's reading is also a celebration of the light. For while five of the bridesmaids were foolish, five were also faithful and ready for the bridegroom when he returned. They have stayed faithful and been ready to keep the light burning. They have seized the day through vigilance and loyalty to the things that really matter and they are welcomed into the feast. I think this week the world witnessed a glimpse of such a feast in the USA and the election of Barack Obama. For those of us who looked on it felt like a victory for the light, offering the hope of something so much better: a man of courage and truthfulness, capable of turning his country away from war on terror and restoring a sense of a leadership that can inspire across cultures, faith, economic position indeed even nation; awakening in so many of us the longing for a humbler, more humane, tolerant, creative peaceful world order to become a reality. Today, present at the wedding feast, are the millions of those who have known the horror of war and longed for peace, indeed given their lives in the hope of it. We are made aware of how vulnerable each human life is and much those who uphold the light need supporting and defending be it Auschwitz, Hellmand Province, Darfur, or the Congo.

Today on Remembrance Sunday we remember because we want to see both the truth of the past and the truth of our present and the truth of the future peace we long for. We remember because we want to defend our present from the mistakes of the past. We also remember because we want to recognize and hold onto the light and the offering others have made to keep it burning.

I began this address with 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' which moves into darkness. I end with the verse of from a prisoner of war in a Japanese concentration camp which is our movement into the light.

No one could tell me where my soul may be;  
I sought for God and God alluded me;  
I sought my brother out and found all three  
My soul, my God and all humanity.