

Remembrance Day Sermon- 08 Nov 15.

Belonging and Remembering. Jesus College, Oxford.

Isaiah 49:15-16

John 15: 9-17

John Donne- *No man is an island.*

Most of us will at some point in our lives have bought and worn a poppy.

Have you stopped to consider why you are wearing a poppy? Or what in fact it is? It can be so many things, a red flower made out of paper, a symbol of remembrance, A symbol of honour, an annual ritual.

There are so many people wearing poppies at this time of year in this country that a visitor to our shores with no knowledge of what it symbolises, would very likely be quite confused. Is it a fashion? Is it some club membership? And why do they all suddenly disappear by 12/13 November?

It is often easy to get drawn into tradition, to ritual or to a group activity without properly considering it. So lets take this opportunity to ask ourselves why we wear poppies? Why do we take part in remembrance day? What does it mean? Why is it important?

We can superficially answer this question and say that poppies were the first flowers to flourish on the battlefields of the first world war, almost 100 years ago, and have ever since been taken as a symbol of remembrance of that 'Great War' and the sacrifices made by an entire generation.

However, although this may explain why we are wearing poppies to our foreign visitor, it doesn't really deeply answer the questions as to what remembrance means and why it is important, or what difference does it make?

About 9 years ago, at midnight as I stood on a freezing runway in Southern Afghanistan, I said the words we always repeat at Remembrance. 'They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old, age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn, at the going down of the sun, and in the morning, We Will remember them. The young man who I had helped put into his coffin an hour or so earlier, was being gently placed on a C17, ready to be flown home. He would not grow old, as I hope to grow old. His name, and face, and those of many others of my friends and colleagues are the names and faces I remember each Remembrance Day. Belonging to the military and knowing those who serve in the military, does make the remembrance more personal, more immediate. But does this make my Remembrance Day more meaningful than that of someone who has no personal link to the military, or to those who we are remembering?

If belonging makes a difference, what level does that belonging have to be at for it to make a difference? A close family member of someone? A friend? A fellow member of the military? Or as we all are, a member of a generation who has cause to be thankful for the sacrifices of a previous generation? Or a member of a community, or nation who remembers sacrifices made on their behalf?

Belonging seems to me to be the reason we find it important to remember. Our old testament reading, tells us

this. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast? The baby who belongs to her? Even if she could do, this, the vanishingly unlikely possibility that a mother could forget a baby that belongs to her, so much more will God remember us, he has engraved every single one of us on the palms of his hands. We belong to him. The names and faces of my friends and colleagues are engraved in my memory. They belong to me. We all belong at different levels, to various groups. And collectively belong to a community, a nation, a generation, a regiment, a family, a friendship group, because we collectively belong to these different groups, collectively we remember.

After the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11 2001, Her Majesty the Queen wrote to the people of New York, in her letter she said, 'Grief is the price we pay for love' This immensely profound statement encapsulates that deep truth, that it is because we love others, that we are hurt when we lose them. In other words it is because we belong, to family, friends, a regiment, a squadron, a community, a nation, that we hurt and suffer pain when we are parted from them. It is of course because of the pain in the parting, that remembering becomes all important.

It isn't only those whom we have had the honour of knowing and losing, whom we remember and feel that sense of loss for however. Last year I was lucky enough to go down into the moat at the Tower of London and see the Sea of Poppies that had been placed there. I also listened to the conversations of those who were there. Many were remembering a specific family member. A family member who had died 100 years previously. A family member who they had never personally known. And yet, 100 years later,

a great niece, or a great great grand son, was there, moved to tears, talking about them, and their loss. A memory to be treasured, not because of personal memory, but because they 'belonged' to them. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast? It seems that as humans we can't forget even our Great great Uncles, they matter to us, because they belong to us.

Others, were simply remembering a sacrifice of millions who gave their lives on their behalf. Remembering because we belong to a generation who have benefitted from their sacrifice, or as a nation, who have benefitted from the sacrifice of many in many conflicts. Our New Testament reading demonstrates why this is important. 'Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends.' Sacrifice is born out of love. Risk, bravery sacrifice in war is very often born out of love for those whom are to be protected. Family, friends, home, nation, generations to come, maybe even others, the stranger we reach out to protect, to rescue. This love denotes belonging, sacrifice denotes great love, and grief is the price we pay for love. Remembering is how we honour both sacrifice and grief.

And yet it is more even than that. The Great War was known as the war to end all wars, and yet, only 20 years later we in Europe were back on the battlefield once more. Remembrance, and remembrance Sunday reminds us that we are all members of a club, whether we chose to wear a poppy or not. We are all members of the club of humankind. Not all wars are fought for noble causes, some are, some aren't. But being prepared to risk one's life on behalf of others, for their sake so that they may be better protected, is a noble act of humanity, one which it is right to

honour. And remembering our history, remembering what has gone before us is vital as we seek to decide how we are to belong to humanity. What is our membership of this club going to look like?

***No man is an island* by John Donne**

No Man is an island,

Entire of itself,

Every man is a piece of the continent,

A part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,

Europe is the less,

As well as if a promontory were,

As well as if a manor of thy friend,

Or of thine own were;

Any man's death diminishes me,

Because I am involved in mankind,

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;

It tolls for thee.

Although this piece by John Donne was written about 400 years ago and has slightly dated (and masculine!) language, its thoughts have been compelling to me as I have looked at Europe and the wider world we inhabit this summer. Can we shut ourselves off from other parts of humankind? Can we live in a safe bubble of our own? Or is no man or woman or child an island entire of itself? This

piece speaks of our interconnectedness, a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Any man's or woman's or child's death diminishes me, because I am involved in humankind. I belong to humankind, what happens to other humans, matters to me. Remembrance of events like the Great War or the Second World War, reminds us that we are a part of humanity. This is a humanity that Jesus is speaking to when he gives these words, 'My Command is this: love one another as I have loved you.greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends....This is my command. Love one another.

Very soon after this Jesus lived up to his words and sacrificed himself for his friends, for those who love him. Our command to love one another, the words of John Donne, no one is an island, every death diminishes me, gives us very little room to ignore the plight of those around us, of our fellow members of humanity. Those who are suffering and in need of our protection. Just as we remember those who sacrificed themselves to protect others during past wars and conflicts, we are faced with a situation again, where there are those who require our protection and help now, and there are those who I work with, who are doing that now, and so remembrance continues, and the importance of remembrance continues.

We remember those who have gone before us, their sacrifice, their offering of themselves on our behalf, and for future generations, and we also ask ourselves, how will I be involved in humanity? How will I belong? As the father has loved me, so I have loved you, now remain in my love. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast, and have no compassion on the child that she has borne? Though she

may forget, I will not forget you! See I have engraved you
on the palms of my hands.

Amen.