

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 8th November 2020

Thank you for joining our service on this unusual Remembrance Sunday. 11th November this year marks the centenary of the unveiling by George V of the permanent Cenotaph in Whitehall, and the laying to rest of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, with the King as chief mourner. I found online the order of service for that day, and would like to start with one of the prayers that was used:

O Eternal Lord God, Who holdest all souls in life; we beseech Thee to shed forth upon Thy whole Church in Paradise and on earth the bright beams of Thy light and Thy heavenly comfort; and grant that we, following the good example of those who have loved and served Thee here and are now at rest, may with them at length enter into the fullness of Thine unending joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I will come back to the Unknown Warrior later, but first some context about today's readings from Luke and 1 Thessalonians. The passage from Luke comes from the beginning of Holy Week, where Jesus was teaching, and being tested, in the Temple, knowing all too well what suffering awaited him. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was written to encourage them in their new faith in the face of persecution. Both, I would argue, convey three themes which were of particular importance both to Paul, and for us as we come together in remembrance ; faith, love and hope (and despite the famous line about faith, hope and love in 1 Corinthians 13 I do mean to put them in that order!).

To start with faith, which was described by Martin Luther King as "taking the first step when you can't see the whole staircase." What does faith give us once we have taken that first step? I would say that it gives us confidence and assurance; we believe that, as Paul puts it, "we will be with the Lord forever." It gives us confidence to stand against those who try to seed doubt in our minds, even if we may not be able to refute their arguments with the skill, and indeed the bluntness, shown by Jesus. Luke omits part of Mark's account of this dispute with the Sadducees, which I've always rather liked, where he tells them at the end that "you are quite wrong."

With this confidence, we can face up to the challenges that are before us, this year most obviously Covid, but in 1920 how to rebuild after the horrors of the First World War. We all have times when we need to be strengthened, and

faith is the greatest source of strength. No matter what has happened, what may be about to happen, or what we fear may happen, it gives us confidence that God is there for us.

And so, to love. It is because we love that we grieve. It may be that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians partly in acknowledgement of losses they had suffered (4:13). At the burial of the Unknown Warrior, around 100 of the women who attended had lost their husband and all their sons; it is hard to comprehend their grief. However, the outpouring of respect and love that was seen on Armistice Day 1920 and in the days immediately afterwards may have helped them. That was certainly the intention of David Railton, the army chaplain who in 1916 had first had the idea of interring an anonymous soldier in the abbey “to ease the pain of father, mother, brother, sister, sweetheart, wife and friend.” The response was extraordinary. By 18th November, around 1 million people had paid their respects at the tomb, and maybe another 2 million at the Cenotaph. To put those numbers in context, 200,000 people went to the Queen Mother’s lying in state in 2002.

Those people were bound together in grief and love. For those also united in faith, there is the knowledge of God’s limitless love for us, exemplified by the sacrifice of his son. Jesus died for and represents us all, as the Unknown Warrior represented all who had died for their country.

Luke’s take on love in today’s passage has a slightly different emphasis. The Sadducees are overly concerned with rules, and so are missing what is most important. They did not believe in life after death, and so could not see the greatness of God’s love revealed in the resurrection of both Christ and those who follow him. This love, freely available to all, turns the world upside down; the very thing the Sadducees feared.

So in remembrance we are bound together in faith and love. We are also united in hope. I think, again 1 Corinthians 13 notwithstanding, that this is the key point from these readings. We grieve because we love, but because of Jesus we always have hope. That is the most wonderful news, and as Paul tells the Thessalonians it can moderate – but not in any way remove or undervalue- our grief. There is the hope of life after death, symbolised by the Cenotaph which is itself an empty tomb. We thus have the hope of being reunited with those we love, even if what heaven is actually like is, I think, beyond our understanding. We know that Jesus has gone ahead to prepare a place for us there, as he tells his disciples in John 14, and according to Paul he will be there to welcome us,

like the Son of Man described in Daniel 7, “coming with the clouds of heaven.” Not being able to understand what that will be like seems to me to be secondary to the glorious truth that it will happen.

We are also given the hope of freedom. Jesus cited Moses and the burning bush to show the Sadducees that resurrection is mentioned in the Torah. They only accepted the authority of the first five books of the Old Testament, and did not believe that resurrection was mentioned there, hence not believing in it. But the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt has another significance here as well. Moses was being called by God to liberate his people. Jesus was sent by God to liberate his people. God, now as he has always been, is committed to being our saviour and setting us free from whatever imprisons us or holds us back. And it is something truly amazing that God gives us such hope.

Even on such an unusual day of commemoration, we are still together and able collectively to remember and pay our respects to those who have given their lives for us. We are joined together and strengthened by faith, love and hope; the challenges we face may change, but we are, as we have always been, given all that we need to face them.

As for the Unknown Warrior, buried a hundred years ago, we may not know his name but he is known to God. He will have been reunited in heaven, with those who loved and grieved for him. He helped to assuage the grief of a nation; Jesus does that for the whole world. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “encourage one another with these words”.

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