

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY
St David's Eucharist
11 November 2018

When I was about 20 I was sent to be a language assistant in a place called Douai, in the North of France. Not very far away was Arras, the site of one of the many battles of the First World War. One day I went and saw for the first time the vast expanse of white gravestones marking the the burials of some of the young men who lost their lives there. The enormity of it took my breath away. I didn't realise then that on the large memorial where many other names of those lost but with no grave were written was that of Thomas John Williams of the Welsh Regiment, my great-uncle, who died there on 24th March 1918, aged, probably, about 20.

He was one of the thousands who had responded to the call of that famous poster of Lord Kitchener pointing at the onlooker with the words, 'Your country needs you'. Like most of his young comrades I'm sure he had little idea of what lay ahead for him.

The same was true of those fishermen Jesus called to follow him as he walked along the edge of the Sea of Galilee. They too would face hardships, danger, opposition and violence. And they too, for the most part, would have their lives taken from them. In one of his conversations with them Jesus will one day ask them if they're really ready to continue to walk with him because, he says, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine he must take up his cross.'

As we come today to remember the centenary of the end of the Great War we do so here as Christians, a human community at the heart of whose faith lies the story of a man who became a victim of other people's fears and hatreds willingly, sacrificing himself on a cross in order to transform those fears and hatred by his forgiveness and by the offer of reconciliation born of an immense and unbounded love for everyone. Therein lies the good news of hope we have for a sinful world.

The slaughter of the Great War was on an unprecedented scale but its horrors were not new. Max Hastings, military historian and former war correspondent wrote an article the other day in which he reminded us that all war is always a gruesome business. Whether you were about to go over the top and face a hail of bullets in 1915 or found yourself kneeling at the front of a British square at Waterloo with cavalry bearing down on you a century earlier, the fear, the horror and the bloodshed are the same. War writes large our human capacity for division and violence, our desire to destroy the other who is, we think, not like us and whom we both loathe and fear.

As does the cross. It too is an awful reminder of what we can do to one another, a sign of where sin will take us if we let it.

Jaron Lanier, a computer scientist, has said, 'Outrage, anger and intolerance are the most effective means to increase online engagement - so computer algorithms are set up to achieve that.' And he also observes 'It's quicker to alienate than to build trust.'

12 people were gunned down in a bar in California on Thursday. In the year up to June there were 15,000 knife crimes in London, four of them last week, all teenagers who lost their lives. A lot of fear, anger and hatred must lie behind such acts.

If the cross is a potent reminder of all that is sinful about us it is for us also a potent sign of hope and new life. That is the paradox we live and proclaim as Christian people. Here is St Paul in his second letter to the fractious Corinthian Christians:

*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,^d not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.
20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5.17-20)*

I read the other day about Irène Laure who lived in the South of France and worked with her husband, Victor, to rebuild relationships with Germans after the Great War, even welcoming German children into her home. But her life and attitude changed after the Nazis invaded France in 1940 and eventually occupied the whole of it. One of her sons was arrested and tortured by the Gestapo. She became a member of the Resistance.

In 1946 she was elected to the French National Assembly with a huge majority from Marseille in the first election when women were allowed to vote or stand for the Assembly. In 1947 she accepted an invitation to attend the Moral Re-Armament Conference in Switzerland. But when she got there she discovered that a group of Germans, the first to be authorised to leave their country by the Allies, was also to be part of it.

She decided to leave but was challenged by an American pastor: 'How can you expect to rebuild Europe if you reject the German people?' She hardly believed in God at that time but spent the next 2 days in prayer and fasting, wrestling with her conscience and asking God to help her deal with her hatred. 'I needed a miracle,' she said, 'but God performed that miracle.'

On the third day day Irène Laure agreed to meet just one German woman, a widow called Clarita von Trott who had been a member of the German resistance to Hitler. After sharing their stories Laure understood better how both countries had been devastated by the experience of war and they prayed together for help to overcome the hatred that remained.

She then asked permission to speak to the whole conference when she explained how she felt about the German people, admitting she was wrong and asking forgiveness from all the Germans present. There was silence when she finished. Then a German woman got up and took her hand. It was as though a weight had been lifted from her and she knew then that she would give the rest of her life to work for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Laure went on to address meetings and state parliaments in Germany, repeating her apology and appealing for forgiveness, so becoming a catalyst for the Franco-German reconciliation movement out of which came, amongst other things the whole idea of twinning towns and communities with each other so as to offer the opportunity for personal relationships and begin to redeem the past with new and positive links.

Reconciliation and forgiveness have to happen first at a personal level before they can begin to make a wider impression on whole societies. It is what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was founded to do and it's been the work of the Corrymeela community in Ireland for 50 years now, transforming division through human encounter, in the words of their avowed mission.

The cross is a symbol of all this. Jesus doesn't pray in general for forgiveness when he is crucified, he prays for the men who are driving in the nails, there beside him.

In a world of division and hatred, reconciliation, it has been said (by the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf), means a cross-centred embrace. In it we open our arms to reach out in relationship; we wait for the other to respond; if they do we can then enfold them in a reciprocal embrace, without overpowering them. Then we open our arms once more for each to be free to move but indicating also the hope and possibility of future embrace. We can see that pattern emerging in Irène Laure's conference experience.

A final image - you may have seen it on the special Remembrance edition of *Antiques Roadshow* last Sunday or heard it on the Radio 3 *In tune* programme the following day. It was the story of a violin.

Sam Sweeney, a folk violinist, was looking for a new violin a few years ago and went into a shop in Oxford where he tried 30 or so of them. There was one he felt drawn to 'because,' he said, 'of its melancholy tone.' So he bought it. His father happens to be a genealogist so he traced the maker's name, Richard Howard, written inside the violin, and discovered he had worked in the music-hall in Leeds as an entertainer but had also begun making violins when the Great War broke out. He responded to the call, signed up and was killed in action in 1915, leaving violin number 6 in pieces in a manila envelope in his home.

Eventually a restorer in Oxford was given the pieces of wood and he assembled them into the violin whose sweet but melancholy tone spoke to Sam when he picked it up and it was played for the very first time.

In both programmes we then heard Sam playing a folk melody on the restored instrument - in *The Roadshow* it was the tune of the Leeds regiment which Richard Howard would have known so well.

Here was a new creation built out of the pieces of the past; for me, at least, a kind of reconciliation in music on a field of loss and sorrow. It was both a lament and sign of new hope and life.

He played for Richard Howard, for Thomas John Williams and the millions since who have lost life through war, hatred and violence from Flanders to California and everywhere between.

May they, and we, be brought finally to the fullness and joy of God's kingdom, reconciled, restored, healed and forgiven through the gracious love of our Saviour Jesus Christ on the cross. Amen.