

## Remembrance Sunday 2015

About a mile from where I was born there is a small Lancashire town called Haslingden. The name means 'Valley of the Hazels', but that's a bit misleading. Haslingden is a place of factories, chimneys and workers' terraced housing. It was one of the towns that helped raise a Pals Brigade (the Accrington Pals) in the First World War. The whole town got behind the war effort and made a significant contribution to the war savings scheme. After the war, in 1919 a grateful government wanted to say thank you and Haslingden was offered a tank. The town turned the gift down and the local branch of the Discharged Soldiers and Sailors Association wrote to say that the tank 'will remind us of things we do not want to be reminded of'. The president of the Association suggested it would be more to the point if they were given an old army hut as a club room.

And there, in Haslingden, in 1919, is the problem with remembrance. It is a really tricky business to manage. For some of us remembering is just like picking at a wound, preventing it from healing. For others it is precious, for others it is political. So, there has been a storm of argument about the commemoration of the First World War, was it a victory for the allies or a defeat for humankind, was it a story of bravery and idealism or of carnage and waste?

On the *We have our Lives* memorial just the other side of the screen you can read different versions of the story of WWI. You can read about George Merriken, the Precentor from this Cathedral who enlisted as a stretcher bearer in 1914. On 22nd August 1918 he was told that nine men were wounded in No Man's Land. In a staggering display of sustained courage, in broad daylight, he brought back eight of them and was shot dead rescuing the last one.

Then there is Hardy Parsons, an officer in the Glosters; actually in a bantam regiment, which means that he was too small to enlist, until they changed the rules. He defended a forward post against attack, in August 1917, single-handed, all night long, until he was overcome. He won a VC. Another fabulous story of courage, *Boy's Own* stuff *play up and play the game*. You have to pay attention though and notice that Parsons died of wounds the morning after the attack, the Germans had been equipped with flame-throwers, He was burnt alive. And that is why remembering is difficult. Which story are you remembering is war glorious, brave, futile, vicious, or a pity?

We sanitise our Remembrance Sunday. A year ago, thinking about a sermon I was going to preach on this Sunday in a Cambridge College, I walked through the Watershed a few days before Remembrance Sunday. The City Council had pressure hoses out and they were cleaning the cenotaph, making it look nice. It is a good thing to do to stand there, the silence might be the best we can do, because the words we use are pretty limited in their attempt to recall the horror and enormity of war. It is not just that we flinch away from the worst of it, in truth neither imagination nor language cannot really stretch to an adequate encounter with the streets of Hiroshima, the devastation of the first day of the Somme offensive, the systematic, studied violence of Auschwitz and Treblinka. With Glenside here today we are reminded of those who lived with shattering injuries, faces that had to be re-made, bodies broken beyond repair. Can we really call all that to mind, picture it, describe it? Remembrance Sunday does not always live up to its name.

Sad man that I am, I looked back at sermons I have preached on Remembrance Sunday – there are a lot of them and they all make a similar point. For years I carried around with

me something that George Steiner once said about Remembrance, it is something some of you must have heard me say. Steiner argues that we cannot remember the past. He even suggested it was immoral to make the effort. We should not pretend that we can put the facts in order and make some sense of gas ovens and atomic bombs. So, he said, today is not about remembering the past, it is about remembering the future. Today, Steiner argues, we should dedicate ourselves to doing better, we should pledge ourselves to peace and to a world not stained by violence, pollution and division. I quoted Steiner again and again.

It is an attractive way of thinking about today. The future is always a better prospect, the future can always be brighter. We can cut our moorings and become, tomorrow, something we have not been today: tomorrow I will be successful, tomorrow I will be famous; tomorrow I will be happy. That is the fixation for our times, the making and re-making of identity, the X Factor delusion that everything can change. We deny the past and build castles in the air.

Steiner was wrong, I was wrong. Remembrance Sunday, is not about the future, it is not a pledge that we will do better. Remembrance is the steady, serious business of living in the moment knowing what we have been and knowing to what we are called. We may not remember fully, but we do the best we can. We can remind ourselves that Christianity is a sustained bit of remembering. We can look to Golgotha and that criminal hanging beside the crucified Christ.

*"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." [Jesus] replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:39, 43*

*Jesus remember me.* That criminal looked back in penitence, looked around in horror, and looked to Christ in hope. To him salvation came. That is how redemption works, you gather up the bits and offer them up. You do your best. It is absolutely not a fresh start, it is the slow healing of a past that has been acknowledged. *Jesus remember me.* That is the prayer for this and every day, that the God who was and is and will be, can redeem what was, meet us in now and open the Kingdom before us. *Jesus remember me*, remember me so that can I dare to remember and hope to be forgiven. *Jesus remember me* as I look back in penitence and only then look forward in hope. *Jesus remember me*, for if you remember me I too can remember and I can hope.