11 November 2018: Choral Eucharist
Remembrance Sunday

Isaiah 11: 1–6; John 15: 12–17

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‘Move him into the Sun’

The last four years have involved huge numbers of us in a collective act of discovery and imagination as we have learnt a lot of history and found out about a lot of individuals. Rarely can the word Remembrance have been more misleading.

But despite the great efforts, despite all the installations and creativity, there is something appropriately incomplete about them. Somehow there is always more to be said, so much so that words run out.

Accordingly, it may be that the most articulate response is silence – the kind of silence we have all observed.

It is the recognition that there are some memories that are unspeakable, some experiences which can’t or shouldn’t be told.

Perhaps tomorrow morning when the four years have come to an end, this is what we shall mostly feel – relief that we need speak no more.

It makes me wonder what the 12th November 1918 might have been like. Life then I imagine was dominated not by the need to remember but perhaps by trying to forget. Above all, I suspect the 12th November might have been seen as the day when a new kind of work began, of rehabilitation and some kind of recovery – silence on its own is not enough.

If silence was insufficient 100 years ago, so it is today. There is still work to be done. At the same time none of us can be unmoved by the discoveries of the past four years.

Trying to honour the dead is one of the special functions of Remembrance Sunday, and to do so we have to hold together the universal and the particular. That is to say, we need to honour the particular people or incidents that come to our minds and do so aware that
they are part of a much bigger national, indeed global, picture. Death happens one by one, yet in war it also happens on a scale we cannot comprehend.

We need to give expression to these feelings, but we need to do so in such a way that dignity is bestowed upon them.

Humans cannot do this on our own – we bring ourselves before God in this building (and others like it) because we instinctively recognize the need for a bigger context. We need a depository for our gratitude and also for our sorrow.

Above all, we need to trust that the waste and horror of war, is somehow absorbed by God but in a way that both recognises its reality and yet doesn’t allow it the final word.

How can this be done without falling into resigned despondency on the one hand or escaping into wishful thinking on the other?

Only, I suggest, by understanding God through the Cross which lies at the heart of the Christian faith. For here we are presented with a God who knows the full extent of human suffering and wickedness and knows it to the bone, but a God, who in the person of Jesus, ensures that Love, not hate, has the final word.

The cross is an empty one – it is ‘un-tenanted’ - and on Easter morning a new world of reconciliation can begin.

So ever since, humans have seen in acts of love and self-sacrifice an echo of the sacrifice of Christ, that man who ‘for our tomorrow gave his today’; have taken to heart Jesus’ own words ‘no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends'; have dared to believe that the broken body and spilt blood of Jesus can nourish us in a unique way so that even in death there is room for hope.

This is the indomitable spark of human beings – we are creatures hardwired to find meaning in life, to reject the notion that life is cheap or worthless, convicted of the notion that we each have a story to tell. That I believe is what we honour today – the human spirit in all its grandeur as well as its folly.

But such a universal spirit needs particular expression. In part that is the significance of all the individual names on our war memorials. For, despite its unimaginable scale, death still happens in warfare one by one.
For me, one of the most memorable lines of verse from the war is the first line of Wilfred Owen’s poem Futility; the poet is talking about a corpse and says simply ‘Move him into the sun’

\[
\text{Move him into the sun—}
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\[
\text{Gently its touch awoke him once,}
\]
\[
\text{At home, whispering of fields half-sown.}
\]
\[
\text{Always it woke him, even in France,}
\]
\[
\text{Until this morning and this snow.}
\]
\[
\text{If anything might rouse him now}
\]
\[
\text{The kind old sun will know.}
\]

\[
\text{Move him into the sun – isn’t that what these four years have been endeavouring to do; move the dead into the sun, grant them the dignity of not being forgotten. And if on 12th November we are relieved to speak no more, we can still act; we can ‘move into the sun’ the maimed and forgotten, the bypassed and neglected of our own time.}
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But we, too, need to be ‘moved into the sun’ and it can help to be shown the way.

So if I may I will tell you where I remember seeing it most vividly.

During this week last year, Channel 4 broadcast a programme, The Fight for Mosul – as Iraqi special forces liberated the city form ISIS. The viewer was spared almost nothing of the danger and fear of fierce battle. As parts of the city were liberated, so traumatised civilians were allowed to move back to their homes or to other places of comparative safety.

Often with a family member holding a make shift white flag in front, they followed with a few beleaguered belongings amidst the bombed-out ruins of neighbourhoods and the sound of sporadic gunfire. Mostly what they carried was in rucksacks or large carrier bags, but one young girl (ten perhaps) carried with her quite a large and unwieldy cage. It was wooden and needed two hands to hold it. A small bird was visible inside it.

But there it was – this wholly impractical, not to say hazardously fragile creature in its cage and she was not to be separated from it.

Caged birds are obviously restricted in their flight, but they can still sing and here in the midst of the depravity of Mosul, this was her way of clinging on to what mattered most. The bullets and the bombs were not going to have the final say – no, that belonged to a caged bird that could still sing. \textit{A little child shall lead us…}
We all need our caged birds that can sing, all need to find ways of saying 'I will not be silenced’, ways of saying 'I am going to finish my story’. We, too, need to be 'moved into the sun’.

And when we are, we find a particular way of connecting with the transcendent, of discovering that at the heart of our deepest longings and fears we encounter God himself. Our story has a place in God’s story, for God is no remote potentate but rather has called us his friends.

Remembrance Sunday starts by acknowledging all those whose lives were cut short, all those who were unable to finish their stories in the way they might have wished.

But the day also allows us to give expression to just this discovery – that at the heart of our longings we encounter God himself - and commit ourselves once more to a future that embraces the hope that has been placed in the hearts of us all.

I finish with a poem written by my grandfather, forged though his own experiences of the trenches over 100 years ago. May it help us on our way…

BLESSSED are the eyes that see
The things that you have seen,
Blessed are the feet that walk
The ways where you have been.

Blessed are the eyes that see
The Agony of God,
Blessed are the feet that tread
The paths His feet have trod.

Blessed are the souls that solve
The paradox of Pain,
And find the path that, piercing it,
Leads through to Peace again.

GA Studdert Kennedy 1883-1929