

## Remembrance Sunday 2016

Every year our remembrance of the cost of war and conflict gets broader in its scope, taking in more conflicts, referring us to new acts of annexation, retaliation and terrorism – Ukraine, Crimea, Aleppo, Mosul, Nice and Paris – but as our remembrance gets broader, does it go deeper? Does it serve to stir us to deeper commitments to peace, reconciliation and the building of a world order, or indeed a European order, in which the hope that ‘war will be no more’ can take hold of us and never let us go? In the aftermath of Brexit, we are entering, arguably, at least a fracturing of the European consensus that has taken decades to build up. This is potentially destabilising and isolating. The Trump victory is also indicating a possible move towards the weakening of international alliances, such as NATO, and an apparent strengthening and assertion of independent nationhood. These trends, I think, are worrying, and whereas we can expect new alliances to form, creating new partnerships, are these new partnerships going to serve to hold us, across multiple borders, in stable, enduring relationships of mutual respect and toleration, or are we heading for something more self-orientated and therefore more oppositional rather than cooperative? I hope that politicians and their advisers are thinking very hard about this. What this suggests to me, is that whilst we still have our remembrance customs – they are nearly 100 years old and may soon need some adjustment – I think they need to be more openly and overtly dedicated to the making and keeping of the peace than ever. An emerging alternative is that remembrance becomes a rather shrill trumpet call for a diminished form of patriotism, in which military references and the wearing of red poppies are mis-used to assert a nostalgic (sometimes even aggressive) version of Englishness or Britishness, and the real issues are

in danger of being overlooked. This, it seems to me, is both profoundly unhelpful to the genuine cause of supporting and resourcing our overstretched military and paradoxically draws us away from the true heart of remembrance, which is to ensure that it will never happen again. Our remembrance customs need surely to steer us towards this goal alone.

In the cause of a deeper remembering, I was struck by the Thought for the Day given by Bishop James Jones on Friday. It was focussed on the silence we keep at Remembrance, which we have just observed. He spoke about the silence that follows the wailing and outpouring of grief when someone has heard of the tragic death of one they love. And he thought back to the time when thousands of British families faced this trauma as news came home day after day, week after week. This was, and is, the silence that descends as the truth takes hold, absence and isolation collide, time is suspended and words are useless – because only silence speaks. And we know very well that this kind of silence must be respected and cannot be avoided. And when we are with those who grieve deeply, we must learn to share the silence and bear with its anguish and stillness. And so through the silence we have observed we are invited to enter its space and show solidarity with all who have wailed and wept, and do wail and weep, over the impact of wars and conflict on real people they have loved – indeed that we have loved. In this way our silence will be both a silence of grief and a silence of solidarity. It is, however, more than this. In Bishop James's words "this soundlessness echoes another silence – the silence of God". He went on to say that this was the same silence experienced by Jesus on the cross, when his cries of forsakenness were met with no reply. Heaven was silent and the silence of heaven persists. For many people this is their reason not to believe. If God has nothing to say in the face of evil, there can be no God. Either there is no God or God

is asleep, or God has no heart after all for stricken humanity! From the standpoint of belief, the silence of God is also a challenge. It is an unfathomable mystery. And yet, if it is true that silence is the only way to speak into the pain of the world, then if God is silent perhaps God is in a deeper solidarity with the world than we had at first recognised. And it is surely one of our most central beliefs to assert that it is precisely through the suffering in silence of Christ on the cross that God reaches out to humanity to turn around the bitterness of suffering through the commitment of love. I would venture to suggest therefore that it is a genuine source of hope to know that our silence is not forlorn, but rather it is the beginning of a new thing emerging from the chaos and distress of dereliction. To keep silence is to seek to turn the world around and take the first steps towards a new dawn. For we live in the hope of resurrection; because when we wait in silence God waits with us,... God waits with us, keeps covenant with us, waiting to lead us to somewhere new.

The silence of grief, a silence of solidarity, the silence of God – and finally the silence of eternity. Our silence beckons us, I think, to register also the ultimate silence which is the silence of eternity, which is more than an ordinary silence. We are drawn here, of course, by our remembrance of lives lost and taken away. But we are also drawn into the dimension of eternity, because only here do we see an ultimate resolution to the conflicts we experience and cannot escape; for it is the place where there shall be “no darkness nor dazzling but one equal light, no noise nor silence but one equal music, no fears no hopes but one equal possession, no ends nor beginnings but one equal eternity”. And as we contemplate this healing silence, this illuminated, musical, eternal silence, are we not empowered to begin to receive resources of hope and commitment that will lead us back to seek the world order that God wills for humanity? If we

embrace the silence of eternity, do not its echoes cry out for the making of a peace that the world cannot give, and that comes only from the mercy of heaven?

My sincere hope and belief is that on this day of remembrance we can break through the parodies of remembering with their political or nationalistic taints, and discover in the silence a deeper call to serve the Prince of Peace, our suffering Saviour, whose anguish was turned to joy and whose suffering is a cry of hope for the future.

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