

Remembrance Sunday St Stephen 9.30 & 11 Heb 9:24
8.11.15

Everybody is forgetful and especially these days when we are all over-stimulated by our mobiles, e-mails, and general noise. It tends to be the older ones among us who worry about this. Little children don't get concerned; older children don't bother unless this means getting into trouble; but for the rest of us it tends to be worrying especially the older we are.

People do all sorts of things to help them remember. We make lists; we tie knots in our handkies; we write on the back of our hands; put it in the diary; or ask someone to remind us.

A businessman was helping to rehabilitate former mental patients. He'd gone to visit a large institution to explore job opportunities. On the way in he saw a man building a brick wall and he asked him if he'd like to come and work for him when he was discharged. The man agreed enthusiastically.

The businessman said he'd arrange this and come back the next week. As he turned to go back to his car, he was struck on the head by a brick which felled him. As he looked up he saw the man waving to him and shouted: "You won't forget Monday, will you?"

In national life there are reminders of important events. Flags fly from public buildings; bonfires are lit on 5th November; towns and villages have their war memorials listing the names of those who have died from the local community. And, of course, today we wear red poppies as a reminder of the cost of war and especially in human lives and misery.

The poppy was an inspired choice as it flowered in the war torn soil of the Flanders battlefield, when all else had been destroyed.

There was an interview some years ago on the radio with a pacifist who tried to introduce a white poppy as a symbol for Remembrance Day. I don't think there were many who agreed with him that the red poppy glorified war. Rather it is a stark reminder of the cost of war in human lives.

The red poppy reminds us of those who didn't come back, and also of those whose lives were broken through injury to mind or body. On this day families, friends and comrades remember their loved ones, for love doesn't cease for someone who dies – it continues through the years. Anyone who has watched the Antiques Road Show will have seen the pride and affection family members have for their dead relatives as they show their medals and other mementoes.

In my last parish in Winchester lived an elderly spinster to whom I took Holy Communion. She was frail and her neighbours thought her rather prim and proper, which I suppose she was. She'd never married and one day she told me why.

"You know," she said, "I was engaged to be married, but my fiancé went off to the Great War and he was killed. When the war ended there were few, if any, young men to marry as so many had been killed." Her life had been completely changed by that war.

So today we remember the cost of war in human lives and happiness – the cost which is still being borne by our forces and their families as a result of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Our response should be to make every effort to work for peace and to encourage our leaders to do so. Oscar Romero, the assassinated archbishop in El Salvador said: "Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not to silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the result of violent oppression. Peace is generosity, it is right, it is duty."

Peace comes when we remove the causes of frustration and injustice in the international sphere, through the urging of such policies upon our government and support for the aid agencies.

And in our own lives it comes through self-control rather than aggression against those who upset us. It means courtesy to others, being helpful and truthful. It means giving time to be with family and friends. None of this is glamorous, but it does strengthen family life and build up the community.

The context of our remembering is in the worship of Almighty God, and especially the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. In today's epistle, the writer says: "For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear before God on our behalf." (9:24) We do not remember our loved departed relatives and friends in vain.

Every year bar two I have stood at Le Foulon Cemetery remembering the sailors who died in 1943 and who were washed ashore in Guernsey after the sinking of HM Ships Charybdis and Limbourne. And some years ago whilst visiting Crete, we stopped on a hill overlooking Suda Bay and saw the beautifully kept war graves there. These sites occur all over Europe and beyond. Apart from those mentioned above at Le Foulon, the nearest ones are the German Cemetery in St Peter Port, and the large Commonwealth cemetery at Bayeau in France. It is when one sees the headstones with their memorial words on them that one begins to realise the enormity of human aggression and selfishness.. It was to stop this happening again in Europe that the EEC came into being.

I often say to families who bring their children for Baptism that sin is basically selfishness; and it is selfishness which is at the root of so much of the world's problems. But we can only start with ourselves and seek to influence those around us. The following may give some clues:

Let us forget the things that vexed and tried us,
The worrying things that caused our souls to fret,
The hopes that, cherished long, were still denied us
Let us forget.

Let us forget the little slights that pained us,
The greater wrongs that rankle sometimes yet,
The pride with which some lofty one disdains us,
Let us forget.

But blessings, manifold, past all deserving,
Kind words and helpful deeds, a countless throng,
The fault o'ercome, the rectitude unswerving,
Let us remember long.

The sacrifice of love, the generous giving,
When friends were few, that handclasp warm and strong,
The fragrance of each life of holy living,
Let us remember long.

Whatever things were good and true and gracious,
What'er of right has triumphed over wrong,
What love of God or man has rendered precious,
Let us remember long.