

Homily – Remembrance Sunday
St Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops, BC
10 Nov 2019
Rev'd Michael Shapcott

To remember is to be deeply mindful, to be aware of the past, to live fully in the present and work together to shape a peaceful future.

As we enter into reflections on this, Remembrance Sunday, let us hold up the words of the Prayer for Courage from the Corrymeela Community:

We bear witness to our faith, knowing we are called to live lives of courage,
Love and reconciliation, in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of each day.

We bear witness, too, to our failures and our complicity in the fractures of our world.

May we be courageous today. May we learn today. May we love today.

Amen.

Remembrance. Remembrance Sunday. Remembrance can be a powerful thing.

The dictionary tells us that “remember” comes from the Old French word “remember”. This is turn, has its roots in the Latin word “rememorari”. The Latin word “memor” means “mindful” and the “re-” at the front is used to express intensive force.

So, to remember is to be deeply mindful and powerfully aware. Some people think that remembrance is passively gazing back. But that is only a part of it, a small part of it. To truly remember is not simply to look backwards, but to look forwards and also to be firmly rooted in the present moment.

Remembrance is a truly powerful thing.

All three of our readings this morning, from Haggai and Second Thessalonians and the Gospel text, call on us to open our eyes and our minds and our hearts. The readings urge us to be deeply mindful and powerfully aware of the past and the present, and also alive to the future.

Haggai is one of the “late” prophets of Hebrew Scripture. The Jewish scholar Ehud Ben Zvi has written that the role of prophetic books including Haggai was:

“...to bring the past and the future to the reading community, to give it immediacy, such that the community could vicariously experience Israel's past and future. This process was one of both ‘remembering’ and ‘shaping memories’... These prophetic books

evoked memories of multiple ideal futures... These multiple memories and hopes allowed the prophetic books to become a shared, communal meeting place in which the community evoked and negotiated memories of utopia and what utopia should be.”

Haggai calls the people to remember with depth and clarity the past and to look forward with hope to an abundant future. And Haggai also seeks to encourage people in their present moment. “Take courage” the prophet says. Be strong in the moment.

This same sense of remembrance as deep mindfulness, of evoking and negotiating memories of utopia and what utopia should be, is present in today’s New Testament readings. The evoked memory of utopia in Thessalonians includes “eternal comfort and good hope” and in the passage from Luke, it is the image of humans raised up “like angels and children of God”.

So, remembrance is not merely reminding us of what has been, but it is about stirring us to move towards a better future.

That most amazing of 20th century prophets, Dr Martin Luther King Jr, repeated on several occasions a quote from a 19th century clergy person, Theodore Parker: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Dr King was not engaging in magical thinking. He called people to remember the reality of pain and suffering, racial injustice, poverty and war. And he reminded us that sometimes it may appear the bad guys are winning. “Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross,” Dr. King said.

However, his faith drove a sense of hope that prompted Dr King to proclaim: “...that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name.”

That deep mindfulness that we are called to embrace today on Remembrance Sunday calls us to look backward even as we look forward, and as we live fully in this present moment.

Earlier this summer, the Sorrento Centre was honoured to be welcomed into the global reconciliation initiative called the Community of the Cross of Nails, based at Coventry Cathedral in England. The story of Coventry and the birth of the Community of the Cross of Nails is an important one for us, especially today. Here is an outline take from the history of the Cathedral:

“On the night of 14 November 1940, the city of Coventry was devastated by bombs dropped by the Luftwaffe. The Cathedral burned with the city, having been hit by several incendiary devices. The decision to rebuild the cathedral was taken the morning after its destruction. Rebuilding would not be an act of defiance, but rather a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world. It was the vision of the Provost at the time, Richard Howard, which led the people of Coventry away from feelings of bitterness and hatred. This has led to the cathedral’s Ministry of Peace and

Reconciliation, which has provided spiritual and practical support, in areas of conflict throughout the world. Shortly after the destruction, the cathedral stonemason, Jock Forbes, noticed that two of the charred medieval roof timbers had fallen in the shape of a cross. He set them up in the ruins where they were later placed on an altar of rubble with the moving words 'Father Forgive' inscribed on the Sanctuary wall. Another cross was fashioned from three medieval nails by local priest, the Rev'd Arthur Wales. The Cross of Nails has become the symbol of Coventry's ministry of reconciliation."

Here are a few facts about to help you to understand, to remember, the horror of that November night about eight decades ago, taken from the official history of Coventry:

- "The aid raid on Coventry on the night of 14 November 1940 was the single most concentrated attack on a British city in the Second World War."
- "Following the raid, Nazi propagandists coined a new word in German - Coventrieren - to raze a city to the ground."
- "Codenamed 'Moonlight Sonata', the raid lasted for 11 hours and involved nearly 500 Luftwaffe bombers, gathered from airfields all over occupied Europe."
- "The Luftwaffe dropped 500 tons of high explosive, 30,000 incendiaries and 50 landmines. It was also trying out a new weapon, the exploding incendiary."
- "More than 43,000 homes, just over half the city's housing stock, were damaged or destroyed in the raid."
- "The official death toll from the night was 554, but the real figure could have been much higher with many people unaccounted for."

One response to the horror of Coventry was that the Allied forces launched air attacks on German targets, such as Dresden. According to one account:

"...in four raids between 13 and 15 February 1945, 722 heavy bombers of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and 527 of the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) dropped more than 3,900 tons of high-explosive bombs and incendiary devices on the city. The bombing and the resulting firestorm destroyed over 1,600 acres (6.5 km²) of the city centre. An estimated 22,700 to 25,000 people were killed, although larger casualty figures have been claimed."

To recap, the Luftwaffe dispatched 500 tons onto Coventry, and the Allied forces replied with 3,900 tons of high-explosive bombs and incendiary devices.

But a different response took shape in the smoking ruins of Coventry Cathedral as Provost Howard, stonemason Forbes and Rev'd Wales embraced a moral vision of a future of faith, trust and hope. Like the prophets of Scripture, these prophetic individuals sought to evoke and negotiate a shared memory of what an ideal future could be.

Wars are a terrible thing, and it is no surprise that there are contests to shape the memories of war. To truly remember is to be deeply mindful. To examine the stories that are told. To ask how those memories can help us to build a better, more peaceful and more just world.

At the back of this Cathedral there is a battle standard that is dedicated to the memory of the soldiers of the Rocky Mountain Rangers, 172 Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force. Some say that Canada was truly formed as a nation on the battlefields of Europe in the first world war. There are lots of memories of those terrible times.

I was struck, however, by the words on the plaque in this Cathedral: "We pray that our soldiers will be peacekeepers always and never be forced to war." It is encouraging to read that the men who went to war more than 100 years ago want to be celebrated as peacekeepers and not as war-mongers.

Which takes me back to the Community of the Cross of Nails. Today, the Community of the Cross of Nails draws together more than 200 justice-seeking organizations. Each of these churches and community organizations are in different places around the world – from Rwanda to New Zealand and from Germany to right here in British Columbia. We have different histories that we seek to understand, and we live in economic, social, cultural and political contexts that are diverse.

The mission that drives the Community of the Cross of Nails is based on three steps:

First, heal the wounds of history. Looking back in history is not about simply recovering memories. There is trauma, there are wounds, there is hurt that has to be addressed and healed.

Second, celebrate difference and diversity. Wars are an ultimate expression of the alienation amongst people. In a war, one group of people are literally described as the enemy. In much of our lives today, we are unduly divided by race, religion, gender, gender orientation, class, nationality or any number of other factors. A major step in the road towards an ideal future is to celebrate the dignity and worth of all people.

Third, build a culture of peace. Peace-making is not a passive process of avoiding violence. It is an active engagement with each other.

On this Remembrance Sunday, as we seek to be deeply mindful of our past, of injustices and wars, and as we seek to fulfill our faith commitment to a glorious future of peace and love, we hold up these three simple steps as part of a long line of history in our moral universe that will, indeed, bend towards justice.

Please allow me to end by reciting the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation:

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,
FATHER FORGIVE

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,
FATHER FORGIVE

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,
FATHER FORGIVE

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,
FATHER FORGIVE

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,
FATHER FORGIVE

The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children,
FATHER FORGIVE

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,
FATHER FORGIVE

Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Amen.