

# Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

Remembrance Day 2024

Some years ago I was in Bruges for meetings. Before catching the train back to Brussels I had time to walk through one of the city cemeteries. It was a beautiful warm autumnal day, and virtually silent. Eventually I found what I was looking for, a small square of graves – traditional headstones, subsiding gently into the ground, not the stark, upright white ones which stretch to the horizon in those grounds solely for war graves. One grave was of Sergeant JFM Hammond, marine commando; died October 11, 1944. Had he lived he would have been my uncle.

Jim had learnt his trade in our village as a butcher, so he was useful in the commandos as they led the invasions of both Italy and northern France. Useful when they found a hapless pig wandering down a road; and of course useful when encountering the enemy in the Italian undergrowth. His death, cutting short a life of compelled courage, happened in the lull before another push across Belgium. One more death, one more statistic, one more heart ripped out of a family.

These casualties of war, which we still hear about today, are intrinsic to war. If nothing else they reinforce our knowledge, deep down, that war is always a failure. It is what happens when human relations collectively break down. It is a failure even when, as in the Second World War, we had no choice but to participate. But I don't actually want to talk about the morals or theology or politics of warfare. I want us to think about remembering.

There is a place for remembering, as long as it's the right kind of remembering. It may sound a truism, but it's also just true, that we cannot understand where we are if we don't know how we got here. When I was a boy my parents talked often about the war, which seemed to me to have happened in prehistory. Then when I was 36 for some reason I found myself working out that the war had ended 18 years before I was born – and that I had been alive for twice that length of time.

Sometimes remembering's just romantic, escapist, nostalgic. Or it might be the only apparent way to cope with some awfulness in one's life. Then sometimes

remembering is not so good: it can be ossifying, locking us into a present which is, so to speak, sclerosed by the past.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions there is an ancient insight, an understanding of remembering which is powerful and positive. It is a sort of rich remembering, which is more than just factual recollection. Remembering can have power, especially when it's shared in stories or in ritual. This can work for good or for ill, because its power comes from making what is remembered present again. So we remember those who have died in the service of our forces: this is right and good, and a mark of gratitude and honour. And the remembering of terrible things is essential in one sense, so that we never forget to try not to let them happen again. Sadly sometimes there is a danger that we begin to relive and nurture the pain. We can do this as individuals or corporately. Then we do indeed begin to risk letting terrible things happen again, because the cycle of violence and victimhood lives on. Consider how Northern Ireland was, and how Palestine-Israel is. But Christ's death on the cross and glorious resurrection enabled all such cycles to be broken: his utterly pure self-giving ended any power which sin and violence might ever have again.

The remembering that has power for the good above all others is the rich remembering of Christ's earthly mission and meaning, in worship and liturgy. This finds its ultimate expression in the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist we make present again the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ in our own offering of thanks and praise. It is also where we can bring and lay down our own memories of the fallen. It is where we draw near to God to receive his comfort and joy, because that is what enables us to live where God really needs us to be. Christ's death and resurrection and opening of the gates of heaven are not just represented, they are re-presented, to God. And he is not just remembered, but re-membered, present with us who are being formed into his Body.

This is where we rediscover that war is a terrible falling-short, an abandonment of the proper regard for all other people who are made in God's image. It is also where we can find the strength of God to do something about that, to work for the day when, in Isaiah's words,

*Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor... train for war anymore*