

Remembrance

Remembering is not a matter of chance. Remembering is a very deliberate act. Whenever I go into houses in the parish I invariably see photographs – weddings, graduation, holidays - photographs that say this is who we are as a family. Remembering is about identity. And our sense of identity affects our attitude to war, patriotism and British Values. All of these three are related. And the Christian faith has something to say about each of them.

When on Remembrance Day we speak the words 'We will remember them', we are making a positive affirmation. This is what we intend, quite deliberately to do. The words are taken from a poem by Laurence Binyon written, quite remarkably, just six weeks after the beginning of WW1. The significance of the remembering is made quite clear by Binyon at the beginning of the poem

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.

I wonder whether he would have written of 'proud thanksgiving' in 1918 after millions of deaths. But what should we make of those words a hundred years on? What should we make of them as Christians?

A useful starting point might be the words 'for God King and Country' which we often find the words written on war memorials. I sometimes discuss them with the Air Cadets for their own promise includes a reference 'God Queen and Country.' I often ask them whether there is any difference between each. The general conclusion they come to is that Queen and Country are pretty much the same but God, if he is relevant, if he even exists at all, may be something different.

I think they are right. The Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God is a recurring theme in Jesus' teaching. It does not relate to any identifiable human or political kingdom. When Pilate asked whether he were a king, Jesus replied, My Kingdom is not of this world.

But earthly kingdoms do get a mention in the bible: they judged by their fruits, by whether they act for good or evil. So, Paul was proud to be a Roman citizen and believed the state was essentially a power for good, ensuring justice, and law and order. A generation later John of Patmos who wrote the Book of Revelation saw the state as an evil – because it was persecuting Christians.

And Paul, although proud to be a Roman citizen, was clear that his identity as a Christian was more important:

there is no longer Jew or Greek...
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' Galatians 3:21

In the language of Jesus, our identity as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven overrides being citizens of the United Kingdom. But both are overridden by our identity as human beings. When the author of Genesis wrote that God made human beings in the image of God he did not specify Christians, Jews, Muslims or any other religion. On Day One there were only people.

With that understanding it becomes problematic to write of thanksgiving for those who have died in war. As Christians we cannot decide whether a war is justified or not simply with reference to whether it was initiated by our own Government, our earthly kingdom. A large number of wars fought by the British Government have been fought against fellow Christians. They have been fought against us. In the Falklands War, in two great European wars, we have fought against men who before they went into battle read their bibles, received communion, prayed that Christ would give them the victory because they, like us, believed they were fighting for God. And it has always been so:

- in our own country in Tudor times we successively persecuted protestants and then Catholics because we believed God was on our side;
- in the time of Charles I we fought a civil war between Anglicans and Puritans both of whom believed passionately that God was on their side.

- five hundred years ago the Reformation led nations throughout Europe to opt for one side or the other and then to engage in bitter wars. And each side believed that God was on its side.

At the beginning of this year the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued an apology for the persecutions of the Reformation period. The Pope did likewise.

It is good that with hindsight church leaders can apologize. It is good that with hindsight church leaders can see that identifying the cause of God with the cause of a nation or one group of people is a mistake. It is good that with hindsight we can see that we cannot identify the Kingdom of God with any human kingdom.

But what we need is not hindsight but foresight. We need not to apologize for our mistakes but to avoid them.

The Remembrance that Christians should draw from history is that war often leads us to kill our fellow Christians; it always leads us to kill our fellow human beings and that most of these human beings we kill will now be civilians, men, women, children, going about their ordinary lives.

What lies behind war, of course, is patriotism. Patriotism is a mixed blessing. What is good about patriotism is that it takes us beyond our own personal self interest and looks to the greater good. The nation is bigger than the individual. In that sense those who risk their lives for the good of country are to be celebrated. To me the most obviously patriotic occupations are firemen and police officers. But a study by Glasgow University reported by the BBC just a few weeks ago showed that unskilled construction workers and those working in factories or similar settings were the most likely to lose their lives. Perhaps these are the true patriots. Why are building site workers not remembered for giving their lives for their country?

But where Patriotism is bad is when it narrows our focus, where it leads to tribalism, an assertion of national identity against that of another nation. In other words when the assertion of our Britishness is to assert that we are not French or German or Pakistani. This is the patriotism

that fuels war. The teaching of Jesus and Paul is always to widen the sense of identity, to look beyond the narrow focus – ultimately to the Kingdom of God:

there is no longer Jew or Greek...
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'

Galatians 3:21

And so we come to British values, an idea promoted over the last few years by the Government and now defined by Ofsted, the School regulator in four principles:

- democracy.
- the rule of law.
- individual liberty.
- mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith.

The need to define British values arose from a need to counter radical and violent Islam, to offer a wider vision. From a Christian point of view there is a dilemma here. If we claim to have a loyalty that goes beyond the national, can we deny the same right to Muslims?

The answer is that we cannot. But for most Muslims, as for most Christians, there is no conflict at present. But we must be clear that although the British values currently defined by the Government are quite consistent with Christian values, it is possible that there might come a time when they are not. And it is also possible that the current values might be interpreted in a way that is not acceptable to Christians. And if that happens we need to be quite clear as to which Kingdom we belong. And we need to be always on the alert to those who will cajole us, bully us, seduce us into believing that belonging to a human kingdom matters more than belonging to the Kingdom of God. It does not. As Jesus put it,

Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

N Clews

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