

**Endurance**

*Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19*

Alan Bennett's play, then film, *The History Boys*, deals with a number of challenging issues in the context of a secondary school. Its theme is the purpose of education. It explores the question of whether or not history is ultimately random – both in terms of what happens, and in terms of what we choose to remember. Linked to this theme is the question of whether or not it is important to search for truth in the study of history, and maybe also the study of life.

In one arresting scene, the boys are walking past a war memorial near their school with a new History master. He talks to them about the people whose names are written on the memorial:

*“Why do we not care to acknowledge them? The cattle, the body count. We still don't like to admit the war was even partly our fault because so many of our people died. A photograph on every mantelpiece. And all this mourning has veiled the truth. It's not so much lest we forget, as lest we remember. Because you should realise the Cenotaph and the Last Post and all that stuff is concerned, there's no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.”*

In our church there we lay poppy wreaths at our war memorials. We walk by them Sunday after Sunday, move microphones in front of them when they are not needed. At Christmas we put a tree in front of them. But they are still there. Do we ever really look at them and count up the names of the women and men recorded on the wall memorials, and in the book of remembrance – the dead of five parishes in Morningside.

Is the sad truth that commemorations around these memorials in church are not so much about, 'lest we forget, but lest we remember.' “There's no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.”

On Friday, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month I stood at the cross of sacrifice in Morningside Cemetery with the Primary Seven youngsters from South Morningside Primary, and some members of the community. As well as making little crosses to which they had stuck poppies, the children had also collected little stones and painted each one individually. They placed them at the different war graves that are in the cemetery, a bit like the Jewish custom

where Jews place stones on graves, possibly because cut flowers will die, whereas stones will be more permanent markers of remembrance.

I spoke to some of the youngsters and asked them what they thought. Most were sad, many commented on how young some of the people who died had been. It was news to them that some of these young women and men had lived in Morningside, had maybe gone to the same school as children today, and worshipped in some of the churches in the area. One boy said to me, 'That kind of brings it home. It's like we're still walking in their footsteps.'

At the end of World War One there was a lot of talk of a land fit for heroes to live in. Some said that it was a long while in coming, in fact, many don't think it's come yet. We look around at our world today and wonder, genuinely, is it better? Still the same greed, violence, spite, pettiness, selfishness and fear that marked the past. Even a cursory glimpse at the rolling news of the C21st will confirm that.

Or a look at our own lives and what is going on around them when many seem to be ground to a standstill by a kind of societal long covid, where we've not quite got over the lockdown. Or the relentless worry about the economy and energy costs and the apparent inability of those in charge to make any difference for the common good. Or is it something to do with the genuine grief and dislocation many felt at the time of the Queen's death, and we have not quite got over the sense of an era ending, and new one not yet quite begun?

What is the point? Why go on? We're not in tune with the people around us, we're not in sync with the world we live in. I've heard it at meetings and events I've been involved in for the last few months. A sense of frustration, a sense of weariness, and a sense of anxiety that somehow life is slipping away, or not shaping up, or crumbling in our hands.

Then we come to Remembrance Sunday. Not only are we made to look at these memorials and the names engraved on them, but we are challenged to question *our* attitudes by *their* sacrifice, and their variety of responses to serve their country. Not all were heroes, but some were. Not all wanted to fight, but most did. Not all had a clear idea of what the reasons for engaging with war were, but even if it was only just enough so that they knew they were standing for something, and standing against something else, then that was enough. And it was honest. Did they, the

volunteer and the conscript, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the brave and the frightened, did they die so that we squander, in our generation, the immense cost of their sacrifice through our some-time lack of commitment, querulousness, and uncharitable thinking, speaking and behaving?

Might we, seeing their names today, find ourselves prodded into recalibrating our lives again? Our Creator God, in the Bible, speaking into our mystery-stripped world where we tend to focus on our own human capacity, and incapacity, and fail to lift up our eyes to see the capacity of God Who is still in the business of making all things new.

Hear and be heartened today by the unimaginable and unmeasurable capacity of God to create, and reframe, and reorder the world and our lives within it. If and when we will work with Him. For people who are weighed down by regret, or loss, or a sense of their own brokenness or unworthiness; for people living with the burden of living in the world today, or frustration or anger – what a message! This world weariness; this frustration with how things are as opposed to how they should be, is not the last word. Nothing is final, everything is still up for grabs in the mystery of the creative capacity of God. That's the message from the prophet Isaiah who has lifted up his eyes and his heart out of his hard context of exile and fear, to see something beyond, something worth working towards, something worth living for, and maybe even dying for.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus speaks to His own people who were living with fear, despondency, and uncertainty, and to every generation since. He invites us not to be terrified, or dispirited, or wanting to give up, or wanting to run away. He allows us the notion that we can quietly and confidently be safe in the hands that carry us through every hard time. Wars and rumours of wars, economic chaos, ecological doomsdays may fill our headlines. We wonder about the point of going on, and that nothing will ever change. And yet, we find we cannot quite give up. We hear some word of encouragement. We see some shred of hope that changes if not everything, then at least something. We are reminded, on a Remembrance Sunday, of these names on our war memorials, of how others with hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares, grasped and lost opportunities, put one foot in front of the other, and got on with whatever they had to do. They played their part. They made a difference. They endured. Who amongst us can say that because

of what they did, they did not gain their souls, and pass on to us many different examples of what can be done even in the most dire of situations.

They must not be forgotten, or passed by, these war memorial names. Remembrance Sunday isn't about victory or triumph or glory or honour. It is about re-membering what war has dis-membered. It's about reassembling what war has left dishevelled. We keep two minutes' silence because there is nothing left to say, but not because we are afraid to remember.

Ultimately Remembrance Sunday imprints on our imaginations, should we need reminding, that Jesus still speaks hope to us, and says, 'Carry on', 'Be your best self.' You will get there. Endure.<sup>i</sup>

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup>Sam Wells, Letter to St Martin in the Fields, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2022