

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 32 Year B 2018

Remembrance is part of the spiritual DNA of Christians. The scriptures consistently exhort us to remembrance: *remember I am the Lord your God your God who brought out of the land of Egypt; remember all the tender mercies the Lord has worked for you; remember the widow, the poor and the orphan, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; do this in remembrance of me...* Remembrance is part of the spiritual DNA of Christians.

The challenge to remembrance is perhaps all the more important in an age and in a culture which actively attempts to *forget*. Our culture, our age, so, so strangely (and dangerously) on a path of forgetting, not only its past but its very self; forgetting its identity, forgetting where it has come from; forgetting the anchor, the foundation upon which it has been built.

As people of faith, as Christians we know instinctively the importance of remembrance of commemoration. This past week of course we had the happy occasion to celebrate 160 years since this church's founding. And what a marvellous time we had! But Christians know we do not simply recall the joyous, the happy, the positive. But the full scope of human experience is placed before us. Yes, joy, happiness, hope, courage, love are frequent aspects of the Christian celebration. But so too do we put before us loss, death sacrifice, failure, grief, doubt, struggle. We recognise these too are part of our human experience but can be safely placed before God. Our culture attempt to gloss over the difficult truths of life: sugar coat them, ignore them or pretend they don't exist. But Christian commemoration does not shy away from the full scope of what makes us who we are. Every Eucharist of course this is played out as we participate both in the sacrifice of Calvary, but *also* share in the joy the resurrection and the hope of glory.

Today's commemoration, then, 100 years since the armistice was declared is important to set before us. Important because it reminds us that the peace, security, freedoms and prosperity we all enjoy are hard won and easily lost. They are continually threatened and undermined. And those who built what we benefit from paid a heavy, heavy price.

By happy coincidence, the readings placed before today in an indirect way say something of the cost of war. Both the Old Testament reading from First Kings and the Gospel reading from Mark tell us the stories of widows. So often, of course, it is the widows who are left to pick up the pieces after sons, brothers and husbands have been killed in war. It is the widows who *with their* sons, brothers and husbands sacrifice so much. It is the widows who so often pay an *ongoing* price. But so often their story untold, silent, hidden. Forgotten.

This of course part of the wonder and treasure of the Scriptures: they place before us stories and figures we would rather ignore and forget! Now in the ancient world – and many places still today – widows are incredibly vulnerable. In the biblical world there was no social service network; no welfare system to provide a means of support. Widows were dependent on a wider family network. And if that wider family network was not there for whatever reason, a widow was very vulnerable indeed.

The desperation that is possible is highlighted in the story from First Kings today. In this account the widow of Sidon has nothing left. All she has, and all she can hope for has gone. She and her son will prepare one last meal, and with that gone, she knows they will die. But in one those peculiar patterns that is such a feature of the bible, it is at those times – those times of greatest need, and desertion – that God comes, God restore, rescues and redeems. When all is lost and hopeless, Elijah the prophets comes.

Now, for us too, of course, when things are going well, when we are rich, comfortable, and enjoying the fruits of peace and stability, we don't bother about God. We don't need him, (we think) so we don't bother with him. But when we are knocked around, wounded, bruised, when what we hold dear is threatened, so often that is when God comes to us. Or rather, when *we allow* God to come to us. When we hit rock bottom - such as this widow - that is when we are open to receive God's saving grace.

But we see at work in this reading the *peculiar logic* of the Bible. This peculiar logic we might simply describe as *abundance comes from the willing gift*. When this woman is so desperate, when she has nothing, what happens? Elijah asks: give me to drink, give me to eat. Surely this widow needs to *receive* something! Instead, Elijah ask of the widow to give. To give! Precisely when she has nothing she is asked to give. That's the paradox. Give me to eat. Give me to drink. And to intensify matters. Elijah asks for a little cake!! This! When she has hit rock bottom!

But here we see at work a great spiritual truth: when we are connected to the God *who is nothing but giving*, then we are able to give and give and never run out. That's it!! That's the secret! When linked to God we can draw from that deep space and we are able to give and give and not run out. It is not hard for us to imagine the flip side of this. And bible also has no shortage of stories of when that comes into play as well. When we cling to substitutes for God (typically money, sex, power, honour) then we can hoard and hoard and hoard all we want, but *never* have enough.

Now, if we get this, then we get what the bible is talking about! Yes, it's a paradox. Yes, it's counterintuitive. But if we substitute God for what is not god then we can hoard and accumulate, and it will never be enough. But if connected to the true God then you can give and give and give and never run out. *The jar of flour will never go empty. The jug of oil never run dry.* If you want your life to increase, give it away! That's the bible for you! This is the mystery Jesus, the One who totally gives himself away...

The Gospel of course gives us another take on this. We see Jesus in the temple. He note the pharisees and those milling about, in the classic 'hoarding mode': taking in honour, prestige attention. And in contrast we note the widow. Like the widows of Zarapheth, she gives the last of what she has. As Jesus puts it *she gave out of her poverty*. Not from her surplus. Her poverty. The same dynamic we see in the story from First Kings we see at play here: *your being increases by the measure in which you give it away.*

Now at this point I am sure the wardens would be pleased if this became a springboard for an exhortation on stewardship! Indeed, this is the text par excellence on that matter. And rightly, does this provide the spiritual reference point for a spirituality of stewardship. Our church – *this* church – is dependent on on-going, generous, self-giving sacrifice: *your* self-giving sacrifice. Not clinging to what we think we have. But giving, *giving*, because that is the secret to abundance. If we wait for and expect for some mythical 'other' to pick up the tab, then we are clinging to one of those false gods. If you are not responsible in your generosity, then no one is. Remembrance Day, too, recalls for us this powerful dynamic: giving when already so much has been asked; giving to the point when there is nothing. But in this lay the fruits of abundance. Yes, the paradox that lay at heart of what we enjoy today. The essential truth which has ensured this church as endured for 160 years. The sacrifice that is at the heart of faith as seen in Jesus himself: Our lives increase by the measure we give it away. Amen.