‘Remember Me’

‘Do this to remember me.’

Jesus at his last meal with his friends (Luke 22:19)

‘Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom.’

An anonymous thief a few hours later (Luke 23:42)

What happens as we gather in groups, up and down the land, to remember those who have died? Does it change us? Do we live differently, think differently, relate to other people differently, as a result of remembering?

What does it mean for us to remember?

When we remember, we call to mind. We reconstruct a memory, we relive an experience. This process is often shared with other people; friends and family are bound together by shared experience remembered and retold. Being unable to remember irritates and disconcerts us; what was the name of the person we met? Where was the place where that event happened? Our memories are important to us. To witness and live alongside someone we love who is perpetually unable to remember is very hard for all concerned.

When Jesus invited his friends to remember, he was breaking bread for them to share. Hours later, his body would be broken beyond repair. ‘This is my body’, he said, ‘broken for you. Do this to remember me.’

The opposite of ‘remember’ is not necessarily ‘forget’. It might equally be ‘dismember’. ‘Dismember’ is a word which feels violent: it speaks of butchery, of being torn apart, of killing. To preach on Remembrance Sunday before serving and former members of the Armed Forces is a salutary experience; the dismemberment of war is very real to them, whether the breaking of body, mind or spirit. When our society sends people to fight on our behalf, we are asking them to step into a world where they may be dismembered. To live in a place of war or violence is to be dismembered.

When dismembering has happened, re-membering takes on a whole new dimension. It cannot be about calling to mind a shared experience, for not all of us have shared it; certainly very few of those remembering the end of World War 1 have any personal memory of it. And yet, by re-membering together we are taking part in the healing after dismembering has happened. Our re-membering is about far more than calling to mind; it’s about more than trying to learn from the past. Re-membering is about healing our present.

‘Do this to remember me’, said Jesus. The act of eating bread, of drinking wine, enables Christians to join in with God’s healing. Christians of different traditions regard that act of eating and drinking in different ways, and we might argue about what it should be called and what it means. But it is something Jesus told us to

do. If we take seriously the fact that we are healed by his death and resurrection, that in Jesus' sacrificial act we are forgiven of all those things that would separate us from the love of God, then in eating bread and wine together we are at the very least calling to mind that death, that dismembering, and we join in the remembering. Our entire faith is about the re-membering, the healing of the relationship between humanity and God, whatever the details of our theology of that healing may be.

But the idea of re-membering also speaks of something profoundly human; we remember in community. We talk about joining together corporately – literally 'bodily' – in crowds, groups, churches, acts of remembrance, and the language once more is of re-membering, of healing, as we take our places in the group.

Does remembering make a difference? As individuals, if we try to forget we lose part of ourselves. When we suppress memories we find painful we may end up broken and in need of healing. 'Remember me', said the thief on the cross to Jesus. Here was a man who knew he was broken, knew he had sinned and knew he needed healing, not bodily but spiritually. His actions had led to his crucifixion and his death was close, so he asked Jesus for healing. Remembering made a difference to him.

How re-membering happens is important. The First World War was supposed to be the 'war to end all wars' and yet the seeds of World War 2 can be found in the peace treaties that followed that earlier conflict. Europe might have hoped that it had learned lessons and remembered well in 1945, but the development of the European Union didn't manage to stop conflict in Bosnia. As the EU has grown, so have the tensions within it, arguably to breaking point as Brexit approaches.

How we remember war makes a difference in other ways. While much of our remembrance focuses on those who lost their lives on the battlefield, there are other stories, other perspectives that need to be remembered. In 1914-1918 white feathers were handed to those who conscientiously objected to fighting as a symbol of their 'cowardice' and yet many of these men went on to perform non-combatant roles in the grimmest of frontline situations.

Conscious objectors may not have fought but they witnessed sights which would damage anyone's mind. Today, in the aftermath of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have our own generations of the shell shocked, although these days we refer to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Thank God that those suffering from PTSD are no longer shot as deserters if they recognise their inability to return to the theatre of war; 306 men were shot at dawn in World War 1 for refusing to fight any more. They were not formally remembered until 2001.

Remembering is not an easy task.

As we remember we recall the messiness of life, the points where we have sinned, the points where our society fails. Remembering is not easy. It requires us to recall things we may rather forget. Anyone involve in the kind of peace and reconciliation work that took place in South Africa and Northern Ireland, or in restorative justice, will say that remembering is difficult. And yet, to remember before God is to be re-membered: ransomed, healed, forgiven.

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