

I love quizzes. I am already an in Thomas the Tank Engine; can tell you their names, numbers and colours. I can name the original Magnificent Seven. I can even recite the Greek alphabet. No problem. When it comes to quizzes, some answers are straight-forward because of my own interests (I'm usually red-hot on the science questions). Others are guessable (any question about a playwright is almost always about Oscar Wilde), and some are downright obscure. Who painted "The Laughing Cavalier"?¹ How many teeth does a mosquito have?² What do they call those little bits of plastic on the end of a shoelace?³ They usually require feats of memory to drag them up from some unfathomable abyss that makes up my memories.

Remembering, in that context, is a good thing and brings joy and laughter to one team along with cries of "Get a life!" from the opposition. And yet, today, when we come to remembrance Sunday, we do remember those who not only had lives, but who lost them for others. We remember the reasons – good and bad – which surrounded their deaths and ask ourselves, why did they die? And that's a tricky question as there is usually no simple reason to answer it. We can look at the historical backgrounds, the political situations that have caused so many wars to be carried out (often in the name of religion) throughout the centuries, but it still brings us no closer to a true answer.

We recall the words of Jesus who said "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for their friends." Jesus uses that phrase to foretell his own impending death for all of us who are fortunate to call him a friend, but we can also apply it to those whom we remember today, particularly those who died in two great conflicts of the twentieth century.

And yet, there is a difference. For a start, many of us here today were not even alive when they made their sacrifice so we cannot remember them directly as happy, laughing, men and women, filled with the life God had given to each of them. But secondly there is the issue that we should also ask ourselves and that is whether they voluntarily laid down their lives or not. I am certain that they wouldn't have wished to die at all. But many of them, at some stage, took the decision which they hoped would bring peace for others; a decision which carried with it the risk that they might lose their own lives.

There is a story of an old soldier who had had his right arm amputated in 1917. Whenever someone said he'd lost an arm in Belgium he would joke, "To say I *lost* it sounds careless; can't you say I *gave* it?" But even that hides the real truth because it wasn't a voluntary act on his part. And yet, he, along with all of those who died, or were injured, or bereaved deserve to be called heroes and heroines, because they accepted their loss as being a sacrifice – no matter how unwilling it may have been. And any sacrifice is also a benefit to others; in this case, to us.

However, in order to honour those who have died as a result of war, we need to ask a few questions about war itself. Many lessons can be learnt in wartime and for many, though not for all, that can lead to a strengthening of character. That notwithstanding, few would disagree that peace is better than war. War – even so-called religious wars – happens when one group of people want what is not theirs. However, there is usually an element of pride and selfishness on all sides because human beings are human beings whatever their nation. Patriotism – the love of your country – is good; but nationalism – hating those who are from a different race – is immature. It is a failure to consider that others have rights as well.

It has been said that nothing has been learned from history except for the fact that nobody learns anything from history. We make the same mistakes over and over again with each new generation.

1 Franz Hals

2 47

3 An aglet

But we owe it to those who have died to look at the politics of the past, to see if past mistakes can be avoided in the future. The Greek word for remembrance literally means “not forgetting”. We can only arrive at the truth about today by not forgetting what happened yesterday.

But far more important than remembering the politics – who did what to whom and why – is to remember the people who died. The men and women who died in battle as well as the civilians who were caught up in the combat in their own towns, cities and houses. We also remember those who suffered during and as a direct result of warfare; the bereaved, the wounded, the homeless – those who lost everything they held dear as a result of one person taking the life of another. Grieving mourners say, “I will never forget him or her.” Yet life has to go on. Slowly we turn back to the business of living and we find that we are too busy to remember the dead every minute of every day. It is then that we start to feel guilty, sometimes because we haven’t thought of them, but also because we have been fortunate to still be alive.

But there is nothing wrong with this. The fallen would surely want us to rebuild our lives and not to grieve every waking moment. And that is why we need special days and anniversaries like this one to bring them back into our minds. It is on days like this that the dead live on in our memories. Our brains are like computers with a huge memory store along with a mechanism for retrieving the memories when we need them. For some forgetful people, it doesn't work very well. But our memories are there as an aid to communication – we share memories to communicate with others.

Those who have died would, I am sure, like to think that they are remembered by those who have survived, especially when those memories are happy ones or proud ones. In the Eucharist we remember the Last Supper in a unique way and it is true that Jesus lives on in his church whenever Christians come together to remember him. Remembrance Sunday is important too because it gives those we honour a sort of immortality in our memories, which is the least we could do for them.