

**Sunday 10 November 2024, Remembrance Sunday Choral Matins**

**Philippians 4.6-9**

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*My enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,  
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near,  
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.*

I struggle with Remembrance Sunday. Perhaps you do too. It is a day of complex emotions and reflection on complex history. It is a day of recognition and of thanksgiving for deliverance. And it is a day of sorrow and disappointment that we are not better people than we are. War is a sad necessity; noble sacrifice the inevitable outcome of the unjust actions of others. In an ideal world there would be no war and thus no remembrance of it. From a theological perspective, one might say that Remembrance Sunday is an attempt to grapple with, and to somehow sacralise, the tangible legacy of sin in the world.

I began by quoting Walt Whitman: 'a man divine as myself is dead.' In this short phrase, Whitman recognises the truth that all humanity bears the same divine image. There is no distinction between combatants, between the guilty and the innocent, between the aggressor and the defender. All bear the same image as members of the human race. And all are to be mourned in death because for a human being to die is for a reflection of God to die.

It can be especially difficult to recognise this when the dead was 'a bad person' or 'evil'. But most of those who die in war are not bad people, nor are they impelled by the relentless destructive motion of evil. Most of those who die in war are the innocent, or partly innocent, the dutiful, the scared and the brave (which are often two sides of the same coin), the compelled, and those who have no other choice but to fight. In the Great War it was the sons of the aristocracy who died in numbers disproportionate to their class. In the Second World War... all those poor, poor boys of all classes whose souls left their bodies on hillsides and on beaches far from home. All white in death, vigour gone alike from rosy cheeks and bronze. In death all are equal.

It is the same today, be it in Ukraine or Gaza, Myanmar or Sudan. Little reflections of God fall like leaves and are swept away. And if the war in which they fight comes to an end, it may only be to begin again a decade or two or three later. Such waste of promising lives. Except, of course, it isn't always needless waste. Sometimes war is both necessary and good. Necessary in that not to fight would be to embrace greater death and good in that to stand against the spread of wickedness is itself a moral imperative. It was judged that stopping Hitler was worth the lives of our sons. The same may yet be true of other so-called strongmen. To secure peace for the greatest number, some of us will have to die.

Remembrance Sunday, as I said, is a day of complex emotions and reflection on complex history - and an even more complex present whose end we cannot see and whose costs we have yet to pay. I struggle to know how to feel on this Sunday in a way that I do not on other days of

resurrection. For that is what Sunday always is for the Christian, a day of resurrection, a celebration of Christ's bursting from the tomb, his defeat of death, his routing of the forces of evil. What is one to feel on a day of resurrection when all one sees is a man lying 'white-faced and still in the coffin'?

*Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.* So St Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, and perhaps here is the beginning of an answer to my question. What is one to feel on a day of resurrection that is also a day of remembrance? One is to turn one's mind to the things that were and are good. 'In Flanders fields the poppies blow/Between the crosses, row on row.' Between the lost lives, between and around the pain and misfortune, the flowers of virtue grow. Beside deceit, honesty. Over and under injustice, righteousness and peace. Beneath the ugliness of which we are so easily capable, loveliness and kindness and compassion.

Reflections of the image of God are capable of so much true godliness, even tainted as we are with sin and selfishness, even damaged as we are by the greed of others and the hurts we cause ourselves through stubborn resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit's grace. 'Think on these things' is an encouragement not to imagine that suffering and loss are the end of the sad tale of human history. For all through that history we have written, of wars remembered and wars now long-forgotten, grow the flowers of virtue that are signs that more is going on in this world that we can see, and more is happening than we intend. The power of Christ's resurrection is at work between the crosses, between his cross and the markers we place on the graves of our own dead, and the markers our perceived enemies place on theirs. In the field of the world the kingdom of God grows.

I struggle with Remembrance Sunday. But I struggle faith-fully. I fight to see the good. I fight to hear the sound of slow-growing justice. What arms I have at my disposal I use to pierce the gloom which sees only human folly and wanton destruction, because there is more to remembrance than loss. 'I draw near, Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.' I kiss my enemy whose image, like mine, is a mirror of God's image. I acknowledge the supremacy of love.

This day of resurrection lifts my eyes to him who is the giver of all virtue, the God of all justice, the Holy One who is purity itself, he who sits at the right hand of God in human flesh, his face like mine and like my enemy's. And I remember how it all ends, all this complex history of me and you and us, humanity and all our warring squabbles. It ends with Jesus Christ the victorious one, the only just judge, the conqueror of death. It ends at his throne and at his feet; and at his feet I cannot hate my enemy, my brother. He and I, equally unworthy, are equally loved by the one whose love conquers even the hardest of hearts. In Jesus a man divine as myself is alive, and will be forevermore. Amen.