

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday before Advent – Remembrance Sunday**

**10<sup>th</sup> November 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

Eighty years ago last week, on All Saints' Day 1944, a young doctor serving with the Royal Marine Commandos was killed in the battle for Walcheren Island in the Netherlands. Historians have written that the battle made possible the reopening the port of Antwerp to Allied forces, in time contributing to the liberation of the Netherlands in May 1945.

The young doctor was my mother's cousin. His name was David Winser. By all accounts he was exceptionally gifted, excelling not only in academic work but also in sport and the arts - he was an accomplished oarsman as well as a published poet and novelist. Above all he is remembered as a kind, compassionate and generous man. Having completed his medical training, when war broke out he volunteered with the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was tending to the wounds of a fellow Marine when a mortar bomb fell on him, aged 29. His family and friends were left heartbroken. For seven decades afterwards, I came across people who had known and loved him.

Why am I telling you this story? Because I am old enough to have grown up with an awareness of the Second World War and its impact on millions upon millions

of families. My own father was a prisoner of war but lived to tell the tale. As a child, keeping Remembrance Sunday was part of our annual rhythm of life. Yet as a young adult, I discovered that I was the only one of my contemporaries at university who had any idea of attending a church service on that day, or indeed to mark it at all. No one seemed to think it mattered.

Does it matter? Why do we bother with Remembrance Sunday? What are we doing exactly when we gather to keep silence, as we shall shortly do in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in Marseille?

I would like to suggest that remembrance is one of the most important things we do. At this season of the church's year, in quick succession we have All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day and Remembrance Sunday. All are concerned with remembrance, and each underlines an aspect of the paradoxes that lie at the heart of many religious traditions, including the Christian faith - ideas that have distilled through millennia as people have reflected on the mystery of what it is to be human. Notions of how death can also be the bearer of new life, and of how light is only truly appreciated when we place alongside it our experiences of darkness.

At its simplest, remembrance means not forgetting the past. The philosopher George Santayana suggested that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. One contemporary commentator has written that 'forgetfulness is the enemy of justice, and the destroyer of lasting peace'. They are salutary warnings. A number of Christian writers (particularly Michael Mayne, the former Dean of Westminster Abbey) have also emphasised that other meaning of remembrance – to re-member, the opposite of dis-member.

The act of putting together again, re-creating, bringing new life out of old, is understood as an attribute of the divine. We see it all the time in the work of the creator. Each spring we wonder at it. Each Easter we give profound thanks for it.

Like the penitent thief crucified alongside Jesus who says 'Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom', our prayer is to be 're-membered', so that we become the whole person God intends. And Jesus's response to that prayer, in the central act of the Eucharist around which we gather each week, is to say: 'Do this in remembrance of me'. Not only in the sense 'do not forget me', but also 're-member me, be[come] my body in the world, your lives offered to God, your lives lived thankfully, your lives broken and shared in the costly service of others'<sup>1</sup>.

The costly service of others. That is what we remember on Remembrance Sunday as we honour, in humility and gratitude, those caught up in conflicts not of their making yet who (as members of armed forces or as civilians) gave their lives so that others might live in peace. In words that St John the Evangelist records as being spoken by Jesus himself, immediately after he has urged his friends to 'love one another as I have loved you', he says: 'no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends'. That's what David Winser was doing on All Saints' Day in 1944. We owe it to the millions who did so, in two World Wars and conflicts since, to keep silence on this day.

In keeping silence, part of what we do is to reflect on the horror of war. One look around the world's conflicts today reminds us of the importance of doing

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Mayne, *Pray, Love, Remember* (1998).

so. Poets are often best able to articulate it. Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, the priest-poet of the First World War, wrote this poem called *Waste*:

Waste of muscle, waste of brain,  
Waste of patience, waste of pain,  
Waste of manhood, waste of health,  
Waste of beauty, waste of wealth,  
Waste of blood and waste of tears,  
Waste of youth's most precious years,  
Waste of ways the saints have trod,  
Waste of glory,  
Waste of God.  
War!

In keeping silence, we do well to reflect on what causes conflict, and how it can be avoided. We do well to reflect what promotes reconciliation between former enemies, and how it can be encouraged. We do well to reflect, not just once a year but every day, how in our own lives, in matters great and small, we can help to make the world a more kind, compassionate and generous place. And to remember that the environment in which wars break out is more ordinary than we think. As we pause to reflect, the words 'Love one another as I have loved you' would be a good place to start.

In closing, let us return to the Netherlands. In 1943, a young Jewish woman living in Amsterdam, Etty Hillesum, was deported to Auschwitz, where she died aged 29 (the same age as David Winser). Her diaries and letters, published for the first time in 1986 and translated into English in 2002, are an extraordinary testimony to a woman of deep courage, reconciliation and hope. In her diaries, Etty Hillesum wrote this:

'All disasters stem from us. Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbour.

Because I and my neighbour and everyone else do not have enough love. Yet we could fight war and all its excrescences by releasing each day the love which is shackled inside us, and giving it a chance to live.'<sup>2</sup>

In the silence, let us commit once more to doing that. Giving the love that is inside us a chance to live. For Etty, for David, and for generations yet to come.

Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-43; and Letters from Westerbork* (1996).