

Remembrance Sunday Sermon 2008

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We are here to remember lives lost, families torn apart.

The 17-year-old killed in Passchendaele, the recently married man killed at Dunkirk, the young paratrooper killed in Afghanistan, each one left a family, people who grieve, a sense of a life cut short, of promise unfulfilled, of a story unfinished.

Those lives are given meaning by our response. What we do, what we learn, fulfils the promise and completes the story.

The story of the second world war began long before 1939. In a climate of economic depression, nationalism and fascism took root. In Germany, throughout the thirties, Jews were first humiliated and segregated. Children who had grown up together, played together, could no longer be seen talking to each other. Stories often start in childhood. In fact, they begin long before that. For the way we live our lives, the views we hold, the fears that bind us, these shape the lives that are to come. So our stories begin before our birth and continue long beyond our deaths.

That story of the second world war did not end in 1945, when the world saw the skeletal bodies of Belsen, and piles of children's shoes representing so many sacrifices to hate. Yes, something evil had been overthrown, but it had not been eradicated. The story is still unfinished.

This morning others teenagers wait in fear.

There is the boy being forced to join the groups that kill and torture in the Congo.

The young Palestinian wife whose husband wants revenge for the taking of his land by Israeli settlers.

There is the boy in Afghanistan who was seen talking to a British soldier.

There is the girl from a strict Muslim family who has been seen going out with a Christian boy.

There is the boy in Streatham seen talking to a rival gang member.

They are not all part of a war, but they are part of the story. For the story of segregation and hate, of division by race or faith or geographical boundary continues.

How do we protect them? Is it possible to help those in this country who are afraid?

Is increased surveillance, gaining more and more personal information the answer? That may help prevent terrorism, but it also puts in place the structural mechanisms that can be used against minorities. It encourages rather than diminishes suspicion and mistrust. It was, after all, state control that allowed persecution in Germany in the Second World War. Surveillance is a two-edged weapon.

In a time of economic collapse, the pressure to vilify minorities within society becomes stronger; the desire to protect what we perceive to be our "national interests"

is magnified. It would be so easy and so tempting for us to place all the blame for threats of violence and problems in society on other groups in this country – it is the gangs, or it is the Muslim fanatics, it is the Albanians drug dealers, it is... The list goes on. In other words, it is all *someone else's* fault. We can convince ourselves that if we stamp on them, all will be well.

We have a stark choice before us now.

Do we take the easy path, the path that has always been taken in the past, the path that protects those we see as our own? It is well trodden, but where would that lead in a multicultural – and global – society? It does not require much imagination to see the dangers ahead.

Or do we take the harder route, that works to heal division, that seeks to break the cycle of revenge, that holds out the hand of trust and friendship, that gives hope to those that are alienated and isolated, that accepts that no one race, no one faith has a monopoly on the truth?

Which path would genuinely honour those who died?

As we stand here to remember, and to honour the fallen, we must also remember that we are not here to glory in some final victory. The story is unfinished.

We have here the Union Flag, symbol of our nation. Do we bring it here as a symbol of glory and achievement? If so, it is as though we are bringing it to Christ to wrap around his wounded body as Herod wrapped him in the purple cloak, to show that he is our country's servant, ours to control. If we do that, we mock him as surely as the soldiers at the crucifixion.

But if we bring this standard, that represents the very fabric of our society, here to lower it before Christ, a symbolic act to show that our country will aim to serve love, honour and truth, then we demonstrate our belief that good can triumph over evil. Love alone can conquer evil.

So as we remember those who died courageously and those who died in fear, as we remember those from Army, Navy and Royal Air Force, as we remember our friends and families, let us carry on their fight. Let us take all the symbols of our society and lay them at Christ's feet so that as he steps down from the cross his wounded feet may transform us and the whole structure of our society. Then the greed and pride that can create an underclass may be crushed, and the fear and mistrust that breed violence may be quenched, and the tribalism that threatens to tear our society apart may be overcome. And finally, one day, we may be able to complete the story.