

Remembrance Sunday 2020 via Zoom

The parable in today's Gospel is a thought-provoking one, and it would be good to preach on it, not least in order to tell the story of the elderly and rather old-fashioned priest who was preaching on this story to a boys' public school chapel. As he came to the end he gazed at the serried ranks of testosterone-fuelled adolescents and asked them: "when the Bridegroom comes, will you be found waking with the wise virgins or sleeping with the foolish virgins?" History does not record the boys' response but it's on occasions like that that a headmaster knows what the school's discipline is really like!

But our focus today is, and should be, Remembrance. I have been attending Remembrance Sunday parades and services, until I came to Witney 18 years ago mainly in or with schools, for well over 70 years, and this is the first that I can remember when we have not gathered round a war memorial for the time-honoured liturgy, though we are sharing some of it in this service. We know its origins, when people sought to honour the members of the armed forces killed in the First World War, the Great War. It was extended to include those killed in the Second World War, and slowly, year by year, we have also remembered those who died in subsequent conflicts, the Falklands, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and, with an increasing understanding of the impact of combat on those involved, we have also given thanks for the courage and service of men and women seriously injured in body, mind or spirit by their experience of combat. And today we would include those who have been killed as members of the police, fire and ambulance services, and indeed members of the general public, who have risked their lives and too often died going to the help of other people caught up in terrorist incidents or in natural disasters.

It is absolutely right that as individuals, as a community and as a nation we should remember and honour them with great gratitude for their courage, their service and their compassion. Indeed, if we stopped doing that, then the nation would start to lose its soul.

A sign of the importance of remembrance to us as Christians is that in every communion service, one of the major components of the Eucharistic prayer is the *anamnesis*, remembrance, when we are reminded of Christ's command at the Last Supper, as Luke and Paul told their readers, to "Do this in remembrance of me." We are called to remember Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our salvation; we are called to remember the sacrifice of their lives by people also in the service of us all.

But true remembrance is not just about looking to the past with gratitude. If that is all that we do, then there is a danger of remembrance simply becoming nostalgia. Remembrance also involves what we do in the present, as we look outwards, and what we plan to do in the future, as we look forwards.

Remembrance involves penitence today for our failings in the past, failings of courage, of wisdom, of care and charity for other people, of seeing others as objects to be exploited and not people made in God's image, people to be loved, as well as penitence for our arrogance and desire for power as individuals and as nation.

And remembrance for the future demands that we follow the example of those we remember today who gave what President Abraham Lincoln called *The last full measure of devotion*, and commit ourselves anew to working for peace and justice in the world, for the increase of the Kingdom, the Kingship, of God here on earth. As we look round the world, at the violence and division in the US, in France, in Austria, in so many other places in the world, the need is as great as it has ever been.

It's easy to make pious statements and promises, to proclaim, for example, *Black lives matter*, but we require action and require it urgently. If we do, our remembrance of, and gratitude for, the sacrifice of those whose names adorn our war memorials, who we remember today, will continue to bear real fruit in the years to come.

And perhaps at the end, I can go back briefly to today's Gospel, and to the bridesmaids. They needed to remember, even if it was only to buy oil for their lamps, so that they could do the task in the wedding to which they had been called. We too need to keep awake and act with urgency in the light of the challenge that lies ahead, because like them we know neither the day nor the hour when the Bridegroom will come and hold us to account.

