

**Remembrance Sunday 2008**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**

Remember me when I am gone away.  
Gone far away into the silent land;  
When you can no more hold me by the hand,  
Nor I half turn to go, yet turning stay.  
Remember me when no more day by day  
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:  
Only remember me; you understand  
It will be late to counsel then or pray.

I've nothing in particular against the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti. She was in fact both hugely supportive of, and hugely influenced by, Tractarianism and the catholic revival in the Church of England. But with this poem I do have a problem. "Only remember me". I wonder if that is possible. I suggest there is no such thing as only remembering. To remember is not barely to confront the past, it is to make something present. And then the line, "It will be late to counsel then or pray." That is quite wrong. It is never too late to pray. When people ask me why I pray for the dead I say, quite simply, that I do so because as a Christian I believe in life after death. And where there's life, there should be prayer.

Britain during my lifetime has changed from a country in which we were brought up, taught, provided for and governed by a generation which took an active part in the second world war, to a place in which

the children of those people are in charge. Disturbingly, recent years seem to have seen the return of war as a foreign policy option, rather than a desperate last resort, and it is surely not a coincidence that recent decisions to go to war have been made by those who do not remember struggling in the genuine fear of conquest on one's own doorstep. I find it enormously moving that we remember those who gave their lives defending the freedom of Europe from Fascism at the same time as we welcome the first African American president of the United States. It is only forty years since a third party candidate stood for the presidency and carried five states, with a policy of enduring racial segregation. South African apartheid ended within the lifetime of everyone here. Memory is important.

Memory is doubly important. If we allow the horrors of the past to slip from our minds, we are unlikely to recognise them when they reappear in the present. For most in Britain, remembrance is particularly about conflicts fought some time ago. But the lives which continue to be lost throughout the world, the enduring suffering of those who have experienced contemporary war and conflict, the fact that such disproportionate numbers of ex servicemen end up on our streets and in our prisons, should give us pause for thought and cause for shame. In this cosmopolitan and international congregation we have people who know what it is like to see their homeland invaded, people whose own

parents survived the death camps, people who have fought in wars far more recent than those in Europe. But even that knowledge does not complete the essential lesson which remembrance has to teach us. It is not a matter of present versus past, not just a matter of looking around ourselves as well as looking back, it is a matter of realising that looking back and looking around ourselves are the self-same thing. Memory and presence cannot be separated. To remember someone, to remember something, is to make them present.

The Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem known as Yad VaShem is named in reference to the prophet Isaiah who promises on the Lord's behalf that the eunuchs who have served him will not be forgotten, but be given Yad Va Shem, a place and a name. There are recalled six million people who have no other place – no cemetery, no memorial, no tombstone, no grave – and were given no name by those who sought to erase them from human history. Judaism more than any other faith knows the importance of remembering – if I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. As a Jew you break a glass at your wedding, you leave the east wall of your house unplastered so that you literally prefer Jerusalem above your chief joy.

One of the most extraordinary experiences at Yad VaShem is the sight of a railway wagon, a transport, set on a short piece of track jutting out

from a hillside, and closed off by a fence. The closure is significant. In the Smithsonian's holocaust museum in Washington DC, one can walk through a genuine railway wagon which transported Jews to their death. But here, there is no such access. You cannot have that experience. It is closed to you, it belongs to someone else. You can behold it, gaze at it, try to learn from it, but it can never be yours.

At this memorial we find a celebrated poem by the late Dan Pagis, "Lines written in pencil in a sealed wagon", which runs thus:

Here in this transport

I am Eve

With Abel my son

Should you see my elder son

Cain son of Adam

Tell him that I am

And there the poem ends. Why? Perhaps because the wagon has reached its destination and the woman is herded to her death. Perhaps because there is simply nothing to say in such a situation. Or perhaps because, in fact, it doesn't end. It simply returns to its beginning. Should you see my elder son Cain, Son of Adam, Tell him that I am Here in this transport. I am Eve with Abel my Son.

The poem thus goes round and round, like the wheels of the wagon, unendingly, inexorably reminding us of the presence, the reality of evil. Inhumanity has not gone away. Many human beings are ever more efficient at killing, ever more fearful in hatred. The witness to the memorial is thus struck not simply by the unimaginable horror of what happened in Europe sixty and seventy years ago, but by the fact that that horror is an inescapable part of human existence, present in our time, calling for response.

The Christian response is to remember, but it is a Christian response precisely because, *pace* Christina Rossetti, it is never too late to pray. Not a prayer of salvation, a cry for deliverance for those who can never be delivered on this earth, but a making present, a confrontation of the reality of suffering and evil so as to learn from the absence of good, what the presence of good is like.

Much ink is spent over the meaning of the word “remembrance”, anamnesis, in Christian scripture and liturgy. In catholic Eucharistic thought, the clear emphasis is on the recalling or recollecting something so as to bring it into the present. Do this in remembrance of me – do this to make me present. What is present to us in the eucharist is nothing other than the body of Christ, the body handed over to the torturers,

lacerated by flogging, nailed to the cross, pierced with the spear, the body submitted to the nothingness, the absence of good which is the reality of human evil. Christian doctrine holds that God himself responds to human evil by submitting to it, by embracing it, by confronting it with his presence in the mystery which we call the incarnation. The suffering of Christ is not a solution, it is a reality, the basic piece of knowledge with which we confront the horrors of conflict and killing. But the remembrance of that suffering – the making present of the victim – is also the basic Christian action, the celebration of the eucharist. We are identified as the body of Christ because we participate in that body: our remembrance, our memory, makes us who we are.

And so there is no such thing as “only” remembering. And there is no Christian remembrance which is not also prayer. The wise and the foolish virgins are contrasted because some brought spare oil and some did not. But all of them – wise and foolish alike – fell asleep. When challenged by the horror and the reality of suffering and evil we can choose to sleep, turn away, we can forget and smile as Rossetti unwittingly suggests. Or we can remember. We can look into the abyss, into the void of human evil, so as to know it when it confronts us, so as to recognise the presence of good by the absence of God which contrasts with it. We can stay awake, we can grieve, we can remember, we can pray.