

LEST WE FORGET!

In May 1999 *The Independent* carried a report by John Davidson on the annual pilgrimage of the Dunkirk Veterans Association to the beaches in France from which they were rescued in 1940. In it he described one of those present:

‘The white-whiskered Royal Navy veteran, both sides of his chest heavy with medals, shook uncontrollable with grief while still standing to attention. A young woman silently passed him paper handkerchiefs.’ (31.5.99)

Standing there on the beach brought it all back. The old man’s grief expressed the power of his memories. He could see it all: the rescue craft, the soldiers trying to clamber aboard; those who made it, and those who didn’t. He could feel it all again, and he lived it all again. There will be many here today for whom this annual service brings back similar memories, and who in the same way will live again times of danger and heroism, times of suffering and grief.

These memories are part of us. Memory is vital to life because it helps to make us what we are. Without memories we should be lost: a series of incidents without connection, meaning or purpose. Memory connects our past and our present and gives us our future; it gives us an identity and a place in the world. We devise special events and ceremonies to keep memories alive - just like the Dunkirk

Veterans' pilgrimage to France, and the Remembrance Day services and parade at the Cenotaph. And each year at this service we keep the memory alive, 'Lest we forget'.

Lest we forget - those who did not return, at least that, but more than that. Lest we forget why they died, lest we forget the cause for which we fought, lest we forget the lessons we need to learn.

Memories are not just about recalling the past and re-affirming our identity; memories are also for our learning. Not every act in war is an act of bravery, nor is every conflict fought in the cause of right, and part of the grief of occasions like this is the memory of those who died unnecessarily and in vain, of tactics that were foolhardy, and of wars that were wrong.

Perhaps when we look back on the recent war in Iraq these will be our memories. The unease, indeed the opposition, that this war aroused was widespread; it was felt in the forces, and among all ranks, senior as well as junior. Have we really learnt from our memories of past conflicts, especially those of the recent past, and from our history of relations with the countries of Islam? Was it right to strike pre-emptively, even against a monstrous regime, not just to bring it down but to reshape it in the western model, a model that is alien to Islam and its peoples?

The Christian memory goes back two thousand years to Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Son of God, the Prince of Peace. In today's reading we heard his words: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give you as the world gives.' (John

14.27) The peace that Jesus offers is one in which people live in right relationships - with God and with one another. Right relationships require more than the absence of conflict (the popular understanding of peace), they require the presence of justice, and the use of military power is only justified if its aim is to establish justice. Early in its life the Church developed the doctrine of the 'just war' to determine the morality of armed conflict. A war is just when it is fought as a last resort, with proper authority, for a moral cause, with a reasonable prospect of establishing good or overcoming evil, and with means that are proportional to the end to be achieved.

As we know, serious questions have been raised about whether these criteria were satisfied when the decision to invade Iraq was made. The majority of the United Nations considered there was no proper authority, and were not convinced that war really was the course of last resort. To end the rule of a brutal dictator may be a moral cause, but not if the real aim, as it now appears, is to establish a regime favourable to American neo-conservative interests. There are also deep fears that in the end the good achieved will not outweigh the evil that has been released - not simply the evil of the civil chaos, but also the evil of poisoning relations with the Muslim world and the consequent upsurge in terrorist action.

Lest we forget? There is a something very worrying about the new national security strategy of the US: it condones the unjust use of force, and when our cause is less than just the memory of those who

died in earlier battles is cheapened because we have not learnt from their deaths; we have forgotten.

We live in times impoverished by a widespread failure of memory. There are many signs: the emphasis on the present, the declining interest in history, the loss of community, and the loss of a religious understanding of life. Maybe the tears of the old sailor on the Dunkirk beach were for more than his comrades-in-arms. Perhaps he wept also for the folly of a world that is forgetting its past.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem for the last time he too wept over it and said, 'If only you had known...the way that leads to peace! But no it is hidden from your sight.' (*Luke 19.42*) Jerusalem chose not to remember its past, and so failed to recognise God's moment when it came. Today's forgetting is less a willful; it is more like an eclipse; something has happened to obscure the memories, to hold them to be of no account. The gradual loss of the religious view of life is part of this process. Remembering is basic to Christianity. Jesus gave his life so that through him the world would have a path to peace, a path whereby its peoples would be reconciled to God and to one another. And lest we forget he gave to his followers a ceremony, the Eucharist, by which he is to be remembered, and the power of his death made present again among us. A religious view of life with its collective memory is essential to our future.

'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' (*George Santayana, Life of Reason*) That is why this service and our other collective acts of memory are so important. They remind us

that unless we learn from our memories we are lost. The religious character of this service is also important, because therein is our hope. Coming together in Jesus' name we affirm, lest we forget, our belief that all are one and equal in the sight of God; that love conquers even death, and that the sacrifice of innocent life has meaning - it is not wasted in the memory of God. We also remind the world that without right relationships - without justice - there will be no peace, and we insist that force be used not as an assertion of power and superiority but only as the last resort to establish justice.

May God give us his peace. Amen.