

Ely Cathedral (10.7.05)

Commemoration of 60th Anniversary of the end of WWII

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## **SIXTY YEARS ON**

Two years ago I went on pilgrimage to Italy in the steps of St Benedict and St Francis. We began at Montecassino, a hill that commands the valley below and where St Benedict founded his monastery. Towards the end of the Second World War the German Army occupied the monastery and Montecassino became the site of a fierce battle as the allies tried to displace them. Huge casualties were suffered on both sides. Before climbing the hill to visit the monastery, we visited the British War Cemetery; we prayed for those who had died, and we prayed for peace. I find war cemeteries very moving. There in front of me lie those who gave their lives for me. I'm moved by the order and the regularity of the graves that stands in marked contrast to the chaos and ugliness of battle; in the calm and quietness I hear the questions that the noise of battle drowns out: 'Why then? Why there? Why thus, did they die?'

Climbing the hill you come to another cemetery where, on the hillside, more than 1000 Polish soldiers are buried. I found this even more moving, perhaps because so many of them were young men: 18, 19, early twenties, very few were older. Their graves are arranged in terraces on the hillside, and there was a continual procession of pilgrims who like us had come to pray and to remember. The inscription in the Polish Cemetery says, 'We, Polish soldiers have given our bodies to Italy, our hearts to Poland and our

souls to God for our own freedom and for the freedom of others.’ Today we remember those Polish soldiers; we remember the British soldiers who fought with them, and all who died for the cause of freedom.

To be human is to remember. Without memories life would be a series of incidents without meaning or connection. Memory connects our past to our present and gives us our future. Without memory we should have no idea of what it means to British or Polish, or a Christian, or to be free. For Christians remembrance is a strong word. Its much more than reminiscing, bringing to mind old times and then putting them back to sleep. Remembrance recalls the past with power and allows it to shape our future; memories of war have that power. In May 1999 there took place the last annual pilgrimage of the Dunkirk veterans to the beaches in France from which they were rescued. John Davidson of *The Independent*, began his report: ‘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.’ 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 crowds trying to climb aboard; those who made it, and those who didn’t. He could feel it all again; and he lived it all again.

That is a very moving picture of the power of memory, but on the whole we tend to forget rather than remember, and as we know,

those who fail to remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

Adrian Hamilton, writing about the VE Day celebrations in Moscow earlier this year, said that almost every issue raised by the end of the Second World War remains unresolved. If that is true, then we have failed to remember, and we have not fully honoured those who died. How might we remember better, connecting our past to our present and giving us a new future?

Today we remember the sacrifice of so many thousands of lives. Men and women, civilian and military, cut down in conflict like those killed in London on Thursday. They remind us that sacrifice brings hope. That so many were willing to defend their country and its values with their lives gave us hope in our darkest hour. Today the problems that confront us, from global warming to human cloning, from poverty in Africa to conflict in the Middle East, are so huge that hope seems to have died. Morally we have lost our way, and no one can find the map. In Jesus God has shown us that love is the way. Love means taking everyone's interests seriously, and putting the needs of others before the needs of self. We see what this means internationally in the campaign to remit the unpayable debts of the world's poorest nations; we see what it means personally in the selfless devotion of carers to those for whom they care. Love requires sacrifice, as these examples show. We can learn from our memories that when we are willing to make sacrifices hope is re-born, and we are given the moral resources to tackle the problems that confront us.

Today we remember community. War and atrocities like 9/11 and the London bombings bring people together; differences are put aside as we tackle a situation that threatens to overwhelm us all. So many memories of the war are about the strength and resolve that came through the renewed sense of community that it created. They remind us that community has a moral basis; it is not just an association of the like-minded, or those of the same race or religion. Community that divides and separates is not true community. True community unites; it provides a space in which the flames of suspicion and mistrust that conflict creates can be doused; it respects the dignity of difference and enables divisions to be overcome. Nazism and its racist beliefs may have been defeated in 1945, but the power of these beliefs was not destroyed, as we see in the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and the abuse of Arab prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Behind these beliefs is a refusal to accept those who are different as fully human like ourselves. But our memories remind us that we sink or swim together; the same blood runs through our veins and was shed in the cause of peace. Community will be regained when we accept that we are children of the same heavenly Father and equal in his sight.

Today we remember that our cause was freedom. We fought to free Poland and other European nations from oppression; to free the Jews from extermination; and to free the world of an ideology that corrupted humanity. We knew that freedom and peace meant the presence of justice, not just the absence of conflict. But we have

forgotten, and we misunderstand the nature of freedom. The freedom that is prized today is the absence of restraint, of being beholden to no one, free to do your own thing. We see this in intimate relations, and we see it also in economic policy. But this freedom has not brought the world justice, nor has it brought us happiness. Perhaps you watched the recent BBC series *The Monastery*. It was about five men who spent forty days at Worth Abbey in Sussex searching for inner peace. And for each of the five men there are countless thousands who are looking for something deeper to sustain them than the choices on offer in a materialistic world. We are free, but we are chained. The only freedom worth having is the freedom to be our true selves, and this requires the acceptance of commitment. Our true self is something given not attained. The sacrifice and comradeship of war were only possible because we were committed, to each other and to the justice of our cause. These commitments provided the moral framework in which we could flourish as people and as a nation despite adversity. So today we will not be truly free until we accept the commitments that justice requires.

Today we remember the power of our delusions, especially the temptation of the powerful to believe that God is on their side, and that force is justified to enforce their will. This was the prevailing view when Ahab was King of Israel. And even Micaiah, who was summoned to give a more independent opinion than that of the 400 sycophantic court prophets, believed that God used war as an

instrument of his will. There is, alas, a similar belief among Muslim extremists, and, we are told, among some of those who advise President Bush. Against those who believe this we have to set the words of Jesus, 'Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Jesus makes it plain that war cannot be an instrument of God's will. We may have to resist evil and violence with force, as in the Second World War, but war can never be an instrument of policy. It seems to me that the widespread unease over the war in Iraq was precisely because we forgot this. War is a blunt instrument; it creates as many problems as it solves; peace requires another way.

In the cemeteries at Montecassino, as with the war memorials in the towns and villages of our land, the focus is a cross. The Cross is the sign of Christ who came to show us another way. He offered his life in sacrifice, and showed us what true love means; he founded a community built on justice, and who taught us that in service we would find our freedom. Perhaps our greatest forgetting is the belief we can do without God, and our greatest delusion that we can succeed in our own strength. As Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who know their need of God.' He shows us that it is in God's strength alone that we shall learn from our memories and truly honour those who died.