

Isaiah 2. 1 – 5, Romans 8.31-39, Matthew 5. 1 – 12,

I really don't like it to be known, but on Remembrance Sunday I feel constrained to admit that I'm a war baby, with memories going back to World War Two in the south of England. The Germans were the bogey-men who terrified us; the Americans the chewing-gum guys who befriended us, and the Royal Air Force the heroes who defended us, too often at the cost of their own lives. My father was in the Home Guard; my uncle a prisoner of war in the real life version of Bridge on the River Kwai, my step-mother severely injured as a radar operator on the south coast. We all came through grateful to be alive and all too aware of those who were not. But at that time we mourned only for our own dead. And we wrote off Germans and Japanese as evil and inhuman.

Fast forward twenty years from the war's end and I am with a former Royal Navy officer, half Galway and half Yorkshire, whom I will later marry. We are tasked with making a RTE documentary about European investment in Killarney – specifically the Liebherr crane factory. It's a German company, and I can't help worrying about how Peter, who lost three days every autumn grieving for the men who drowned when his ship was torpedoed, would relate to real life Germans – the Hun, as he used to call them.

Liebherr's managing director had been with the SS. Not a good sign. But the job had to be done. And to my surprise, within ten minutes of first meeting, the two men were behaving like bosom buddies, buying each other drinks and joking that they would have cheerfully killed each other 20 years before, and congratulating each other on being still alive and kicking.

That's how easily common humanity can overcome prejudice, given the right conditions, and given time. Both men had been fighting for the values they took for granted at the time, the survival of their own country, community, family. Now they understood each other and had no trouble letting the old enmity go.

Sometimes common humanity can even trump nationalism in the thick of the fray – witness the Christmas truce of 1914, when the German soldiers started singing and calling out Christmas greetings from their trenches, prompting a good will gathering between the sides in No Man's Land, exchanging gifts of tobacco, souvenirs and food, only to be ordered back to killing each other next day.

Awareness of our common humanity can appear on the national scene as well, sometimes as a challenge to blinkered thinking. Some of you here may remember how Archbishop Robert Runcie insisted at the end of the Falklands War in 1982 on

praying at the solemn service in St Paul's Cathedral for the dead of both sides, British and Argentinian alike, to the fury of prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

The question for me, then, this Remembrance Day, is how - to honour those who died in war even as we grieve for them - we can prompt one another to let our common humanity trump aggression *before the fighting starts*. Because fighting to kill is dehumanizing more than it is heroic; it denies the humanity of our opponents while it strips us of our own humanity. And if our aggressive responses have put even one person into the hell of trench warfare, bombing and terror, that is a stain on our lives even uglier than the suffering it has caused *them*.

In today's world there are other, new, challenges: where do we stand with regard to the thousands of hungry, homeless, frightened people trying to leave Asia and Africa for Europe? If we join in the populist refusal to receive them, are we not sowing the seeds of a new Nazism, a new world conflict based on putting others down so that our own group may flourish? If that happens, Europe will have learned nothing from our tragic past. We will not have kept faith with those who gave their lives to defend Christian values and establish a just peace.

Let's be aware that to honour those who died in war is not in any way to excuse or advocate armed conflict. It is to repent of our own aggression, our own

limited view of God's world, our tendency to divide people into good and bad, right and wrong, "us" and "them", a tendency that eventually makes war and the human degradation and despair it brings inevitable. To honour, remember, and beg forgiveness of our war dead and their loved ones, means we resolve now to move forward towards peace and justice for all.

Isaiah recognized this, and more, in the words of today's Old Testament reading. The call to all nations to go up to "the mountain of the Lord", as I read it today, tells us that the God of Israel is also the God of all nations and the creator of all peoples; that we all, from within our different cultures and histories, are called as pilgrims to walk towards the peak of God's holy mountain, to find God's truth, mercy and peace together. As we climb higher on the mountain, we can recognize each other's path towards the summit; it may not be our own path, but it is leading to the same fulfillment: as we reach the top to embrace our brothers and sisters who formerly were strangers, like the soldiers of the Christmas truce, we will indeed, metaphorically, beat our swords into ploughshares . . . and not study war any more.

So will we in future years be wearing poppies to honour the victims of past atrocities? If so, they may be mixed with shamrock, even with Easter lilies, with thistles, olive branches, or lotus flowers. What is important is not what we wear on our lapels but what we hold in our hearts: God's love for all peoples, all cultures, rich

and poor, settled and dispossessed, present and future. Can we become channels for God's peace and desire for human flourishing and harmony; humbly aware of our own limitations and understanding of one another's; staying close to the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations?

That healing from past trauma can come about by our own willingness to admit our responsibility to those we have wronged, grieving not only for our own dead, but also for theirs, those who bore the brunt of our own murderous ferocity.

An example of what I mean is to be found in a poem by Ulster man John Hewitt, dedicated to the people of Dresden, that North German city famed for its delicate porcelain figures, which was annihilated in Winston Churchill's revenge for the Luftwaffe's raid on Coventry. It goes like this:

*To the People of Dresden*

*Your famous city stood, plucked out of time,  
a dream pavilion set in porcelain,  
where the masked dancers paced in stately mime . . .  
Then towards disaster all seemed swiftly drawn,  
your cruel firestorm fuelling men's fears,  
to shards all shattered, all those dancers gone,  
in the dark Europe of my middle years.*

*But now the darkness breaks, and I have stood,  
shouldered with thousands in your Altmarkt Square,  
to swear my silent oath of brotherhood,  
and join my lonely prayer to your vast prayer  
that by the common will of common men  
no war shall ever darken day again.*

Getting back to Isaiah's "mountain of the Lord", let us not delay setting out on the climb, and begin, like John Hewitt, by reaching out to those who are different, whom we have injured or might still seek to injure. If Christ is for us, who can be against us? And if we are for Christ, and in Christ, how can we not hold one another – whatever our background, tradition or situation - in his love?

Blessed are the peace-makers, for they will be called children of God. Amen.

*Ginnie Kennerley 12.11.2017*