

Remembrance Sunday
Fr Jonathan Jong

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Having retired from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Senkichi Awaya devoted much of his time to a home-grown Japanese Christian movement, the Mukyōkaishugi, which is a mixed bag. On one hand, it stood against nationalism and militarism; good. On the other, it repudiated liturgy, sacraments, and ordained ministry; less good. I suppose they're kind of like Quakers.

A bit over a year into retirement, Awaya was called back out to become mayor of Hiroshima. The mayor was eating breakfast with his son Shinobu and granddaughter Ayako that morning on Monday, August 6th 1945, when the bomb fell 30,000 feet in 44 seconds, and killed over 70,000 people, the vast majority of them civilians. Ayako was three-years-old.

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It was a terrible thing. Also terrible is that part of me that is glad that you did it: you, and the Canadians, and the Americans, who worked together on the Manhattan Project that ended the war with a horrifying bang, and not a whimper.

You see, the Japanese captured my hometown on Christmas Eve 1941, and I have never quite forgiven them for it. They wrought torturous devastation all over East Asia, and targeted the Chinese for special cruelty. And it all ended abruptly after the events of August 6th: the empire surrendered unconditionally on August 15th, just two days before they had planned to slaughter every prisoner in the main internment camp, not three miles from my childhood home.

My feelings about this are totally uncomplicated, and totally immune to arguments about how many lives were saved or not saved by President Truman's rain of ruin. They are driven by a sort of abstract hatred that is the peculiar offspring of cultural memory, the memory of violence and injustice never actually personally experienced. Not even second hand. My family did not fight the Japanese: my great grandfather, a tinsmith, even did business

with them, a fact that makes me blush with shame even to say it. In fact, we fought you, the British after the war, who were our colonizers, after all: my mother's brothers were Maoists in the 1960s, and one of them was killed, an anti-imperialist guerrilla fighter in Indonesian Kalimantan. There is no national day of remembrance for boys like him.

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Truly, I tell you, it takes a better preacher than me to know how to talk about Jesus while talking about war.

Out of the question is that old trick of correlating the sacrifice of our servicemen and -women to that of Christ himself, all of whom died for us, one way or another. That would be the obvious way to bring religion into it, short of a defence of just war theory, which would in any case dribble unconvincingly from my lips. No: as in all sad times and of all sad things, we must speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

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The Great War. The Second World War. The Borneo Confrontation. The Gulf War, which is the first I remember seeing on television, and all the others from my childhood, from which I learnt the names of places like Sierra Leone and Somalia and Chechnya and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The War in Iraq and Afghanistan and wherever it is that the leaders of our free world tell us there are terrorists out to get us these days.

The remembrance of them should be grievous unto us, perhaps especially to those of us who only have to tolerate their burden very indirectly, because we have outsourced that burden, mostly to white working class boys. And a lot of them are *boys*: about a quarter of new recruits are under 18.¹ We are the only country in Europe to have child soldiers.

Which is just to say that we have a lot that needs forgiving, which is to say that we have a lot that needs repenting, which is to say that we have a lot that needs remembering. This is, after all, the great insight of the Truth and Reconciliation movement:

¹ Table 8, UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 October 2016

that it is by remembering the truth, even the hard truths, especially the hard truths, that we can find forgiveness and peace.

And so it is that we have to remember that our peace is bought with the blood of young men and women, most of whom we will never meet. They die for us, or return home to find themselves twice as likely as their peers to be unemployed and nearly twice as likely to suffer long-term illness. The ex-service community is estimated to make up 10% of the homeless population and 5% of the prison population.² And that's just on our side of the trenches; the statistics of the people we've sent our soldiers to kill are harder to obtain.

Of course, the fact of the matter is that we do not send people to war to die for us, but to kill for us. Soldiers would be of no use to us if all they did was died. That old preacher's trick notwithstanding, the Western Front is therefore not like Calvary, except insofar as they are both products and evidence of a fallen world.

² <http://www.rblcdn.co.uk/media/2275/2014householdsurveyreport.pdf>

None of which is to discourage people from thanking members of the armed forces for their service. But it is to say that apology may be more morally appropriate: apology, not only for failing to care about the welfare of veterans, but also for failing to improve the economic prospects of the kids in Britain's poorest schools to whom we delegate our violence.^{3,4} And for this world of our making, trapped by our fear of one another in cycles of pre-emptive aggression and retaliation; for this world in which pacifism isn't the overwhelmingly obvious and easy choice, whose political realism is questionable and indeed questioned even by the most dovish among us.

This, then, is our act of remembrance: a repentance of our collective amnesia and ignorance, wilful or otherwise of the actual cost of so-called "national security", and of the actual humanity of those we send off to kill as well as those whom we seek to kill. A repentance too of the baseness of our fear and rage that leads us so to dehumanise our enemies as to feel relief or—God forbid—joy at their utter

³ <http://www.informedchoice.org.uk/armyvisitstoschools.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/09/british-army-is-targeting-working-class-young-people-report-shows>

destruction, not to mention our stubborn refusal to forgive them, having ourselves been forgiven so much. Or maybe that's just me.

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Where the Book of Common Prayer goes wrong is also where I often do, wallowing in our manifold sins and weaknesses, and forgetting the other place of memory in Christian life. The *anamnesis* in the eucharistic liturgy—from the command to “do this in remembrance of me”—is that part after the words of institution when we proclaim Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension, and coming again. In this act of remembrance, we are caught up in his offering to the Father, which is just to say that in the anamnesis we too are being offered to God.

It should come as no surprise that remembrance is involved in both repentance and offering; after all, repentance is nothing other than the offering of ourselves, sinful and weak, to the God who forgives and redeems, the same God who raises Jesus from the dead and to whom the Risen Christ ascends and whose Kingdom he brings in glory. This linking of general confession with anamnesis brings us hope:

that the cross—and the human cruelty and injustice and insecurity that brought it and brings all violence about—is not the final word. There is a kingdom still to come, and already in and among us, whose prince is true peace.

We offer therefore our memories—ridden with guilt and shame; and nostalgia and jingoism; and sorrow and anger and vengefulness—and we ask that the wounded Christ heal us and our world, knowing full well that this healing ends neither with our confession, nor with his crucifixion, but there is a commissioning to come after communion. Go in peace, we are told, and this is a big ask, to be sure. But there is no better place to start than at the day's object of remembrance and repentance.

You might go support a charity for veterans. I might go be nice to a Japanese tourist.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**