

## Remembrance Sunday 2021

**Daniel 12:1-3, Hebrews 10:11-14, 18, Mark 13:24-32**

“But in those days, after that suffering... they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

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

Symbolism is never static. Once, the flower for remembrance was the pansy - with its etymological origin, pensées, standing for thoughts and memories -- but then poppies sprang up in unprecedented numbers in fields disturbed by tanks in the First World War. Beauty out of turbulence; a reminder of the cost of war, rooted in the earth on which men died.

It is much harder now than it was at the close of the First World War, or the second, to describe a unified national feeling about remembrance. We no longer live in a time when everyone knew someone who had fought, or died, in a war. So in failing to give you the universal, all I can offer is the particular — a bit of Brazil family history.

I grew up surrounded by people who liked to talk about being in the army. My parents had great stories of working near the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea where they were stationed in the late 70s and early 80s, going on secret dates because he was an officer and she wasn't. My father and brothers watched endless films and television series set during the second world war, perhaps because my grandfather, who fought in it, had died in 1985; so his involvement, and the idea of that conflict, had become an enjoyable legend rather than a source of painful living memory.

One thing I understood about my grandfather, who died before I was born, was that the pieces of his story that we had did not come from him, because he hardly ever spoke about it. His family found out the details of his experience years after the fact because of a newspaper article: how his plane had been shot down over the sea near the Italian coast; how, with a nearly-severed leg, treading water in the wreckage, he had kept an unconscious comrade afloat; how he had been picked up by Italian fishing boats, imprisoned, and eventually escaped. And despite this genuinely fantastic story of heroism, he just didn't want to talk about it.

I have only one close friend who has seen combat. He was involved with the invasion of Iraq, and he was absolutely

unprepared for it. His unit was not materially equipped to defend themselves. Army musicians were deployed as field hospital guards and general duties platoon, responsible for burning amputated body parts. He told me this story only once, because he doesn't like to talk about it either. My grandfather and my friend, who share the same name, both came back relatively unscathed, were both deeply traumatised by war.

Perhaps this is why we lean so hard on the idea of sacrifice when we talk about Remembrance. "Sacrifice" is a word deeply embedded in Christian culture and theology. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is closely bound up with the idea of his woundedness. Catholic spirituality can dwell rather closely sometimes on the wounds of Christ: his hands, his feet, his side. Art on this subject is often disturbingly graphic: the sixteenth-century Isenheim altarpiece, for instance, not only shows Jesus' hands splayed horribly from the nails that pierce them, but also shows a body afflicted with the same sores that plague sufferers in the hospital where the painting originally hung would have had, demonstrating that Christ suffered alongside them, in a wounded and pain-wracked human body.

Jesus' sacrifice is one of participation in our misery. But the letter to the Hebrews makes an important distinction: that Christ "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins... For by a single

offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.” He does it only once.

Sacrifice means something different in war than it did on the cross. The point of the red poppy is not only to honour military personnel and their families, and raise money to support them, but to remind ourselves that war is costly. The pacifist white poppy, too, is a symbol that reminds us of the cost of war. They may be worn by people who seem to disagree, but they point to the same reality.

Humans have short memories, and we are abidingly selfish. Our sinfulness, and our failure to learn, means that the sacrifices made by people who have been the victims and casualties of war have never been enough to prevent future conflicts.

The words from Hebrews about priestly sacrifice in the temple are chilling in the context of the human toll of war: “And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.” Human life, human mental health, well-being and peace, home and livelihood, offered again and again in war, to no avail. And it is worse when we think of the children and bystanders, all civilians, whom we, in our cowardice, call collateral damage.

God, of course, does not fail. “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified,” says the writer of Hebrews, speaking of the perfection of Christ’s sacrifice, necessary only once to conquer sin and death.

We have a faith that helps us to remember that perfect sacrifice every time we approach the altar, invited to participate in the new covenant established by the cross. The Eucharist is a symbol that even employs the word “remembrance”: “do this in remembrance of me”. As symbols go, the poppy isn’t bad either. Whether white or red, it reminds us with an outward sign to commit to something that embodies Christian love: guarding, and cherishing, the lives and memories of those who have suffered as the result of warfare and conflict, remembering their suffering in order to cherish this and future generations by working to build a world in which war is no longer necessary.

We will probably fail; we will probably have to wait for perfect peace in the coming of Christ at the end of the world. But making an attempt means being fully human: we remember in sorrow, but we look forward in hope.