

Town Centre Remembrance Service 2013

(Reading: Isaiah 49.13-16a)

It was only after she died that I discovered why. Why, Sunday by Sunday, an elderly lady sat doggedly at the front of the Parish Church on the other side of a pillar to everybody else.

The story, when I finally heard it, was actually rather poignant. Her brother had been killed in action during World War Two, and his memory, inscribed on her heart, resonated with his name inscribed on the war memorial in church. It was a tangible connection to him, and she sat as close to it as she could reasonably get.

Recently I had the privilege of rededicating the memorial here following the addition of another 18 names. Their inscriptions are a tangible, public reminder and affirmation of their individual sacrifices, and of the grief and loss of their loved ones. Remembrance, once inscribed powerfully on the hearts of all the people of this land through the shared experiences of war and loss, is inscribed on this memorial for those of us who have only ever lived in peace (and thank God for that); inscribed here 'lest we forget'; inscribed because their sacrifice was for us - whether we appreciate it or not.

'Lest we forget.' 'Lest we forget' the price they paid, certainly; but also 'lest we forget' the reason they and their comrades were willing to face danger and death - as their comrades continue to do today, in places such as Afghanistan. (Only a few days ago, we heard of another British casualty there - Warrant Officer 2 Ian Michael Fisher.) Their sacrifices were for freedom; a costly freedom so that we, and others, can live according to the values we believe to be right.

Such values have been inscribed and nurtured in the hearts of the people of our land over centuries. Sometimes they've been shaped through turbulence and dissent; sometimes by common consent. Despite our shortcomings and our blind spots (and we have many), our values have found expression in a pattern of government and of law which is the envy of the world; in a way of life which aspires to offer opportunity and hope to the poor and the stranger, as well as the wealthy and the well-connected; in a society which seeks to recognise the equal worth of every citizen, including the sick, the vulnerable and the children; in the provision of education, health and social care regardless of rank or income. Authority is wielded, not by the most violent and feared, but by those elected by and accountable to their peers. Add to all that a generosity of spirit in personal and charitable endeavour, a striving for justice, and what Admiral Nelson called 'humanity after victory' - Jesus called it 'loving your enemies' - and it becomes clear that our values are worth preserving, even at the cost of life itself.

Of course, we don't have a monopoly of virtue. Neither have we been universally successful in working through and living out our values. The UK isn't Utopia; neither is it the fullness of what Jesus called 'the Kingdom of God.' But ('lest we forget'), as we learn about the world of the 20th and 21st centuries and see its atrocities, suppression and suffering; as we read ancient history and understand its harsh and

arbitrary values, we realise that without 'the few', our society would be much, much worse - and it nearly was.

I spent two weeks in Albania this summer. In recent history it was a cruel and violent land under a ruthless dictator. After that, it became a lawless and corrupt land of mob rule and further violence, before courageous efforts towards stability and good government. There are many other nations which experienced the slipping-away of their values along with their freedom during the turbulent years of the century that has past. Thank God that through its darkest days, our fundamental values were safeguarded; thank God they still remain inscribed on our hearts.

Safeguarding our cherished values, the values inscribed on our hearts, owes so much to the people we cherished whose names are inscribed on the memorial here. And in our Bible reading, we heard of cherished people whose names are inscribed on the very hands of God; names inscribed lest we on earth forget; names inscribed as the assurance that God remembers the sufferings of his people with compassion and comfort.

Let's call to mind the sacrifices and suffering of those commemorated here, not just on one Sunday morning in the year, but every time we pass. Let's think again about our own priorities, our own attitudes, the things we could do and the people we could be. Let's express through our lives the highest and noblest values we have the freedom to hold. And let's become what God has created us to be: people who share his gracious love not only with those like ourselves, but also with those who challenge us by their difference.

Because that is the greatest tribute of all; the most sincere expression of our words,
'We will remember them.'