

Bishop Paul's Reflections on Remembrance

With the approach of Remembrance Sunday each year we no doubt become increasingly aware of the memorials to be found in so many of our towns and villages. Where I am based, in Aldershot, for example we have a Cenotaph in the Municipal Gardens. On Whitehall there is the National Memorial, the Cenotaph, which was erected 100 years ago this year. These memorials punctuate our civic landscape ... and our history. Over 100,000 of them. Much of the time they can, of course, almost go unnoticed so much are they a part of our national architecture. But they help us maintain a connection with our past.

Exclamation Marks

If indeed our memorials serve as punctuation marks, their obelisk design sets them out most obviously as **exclamation marks**.

As such perhaps they represent a forceful exclamation set in stone, each name on those memorials exclaiming an horrific truth of our past.

Perhaps this makes us stop, read the names, mouth those names, touch those names and remember that behind each one there was a person, a story, a family...and in every case, a tragedy.

Question Marks

Who does not ask "why" when stopping at a war memorial to contemplate. Why is peace so difficult? Perhaps we question the very nature of peace. How could this have happened? It might be a reminder to Christians that ultimate Peace lies in Christ and is not simply the absence of war. That without divine guidance we are destined to repeat our mistakes. God surely speaks forcefully through human tragedy and we do well to stop awhile and discern His voice in response to our questions.

Brackets

For some perhaps the war memorials represent **Brackets** – "Information that is not essential to the main point". An aberration from an otherwise progressive history of which we take passing note but do not or should not dwell upon. We should do more forgetting and less remembering some might say, as though remembering might keep our demons alive. Yet the opposite is true. As the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us: "there is nothing new under the sun"... and as Harry S Truman added: "only the history we forget". Please God we learn through the growing pains of history and learn most importantly that we need saving. That left to our own human devices lies the way of pain and suffering.

Full Stop

A **Full Stop** – Not representing the end of a story and time to “move on” but the closing of a chapter, a chapter setting the scene of an unfolding narrative. As our history unfolds it must recall its preceding twists and turns, failures and successes, in order move forward. It must be true to its past. In solidarity with its past.

Each year on Remembrance Sunday we gather for a great act of national remembrance and prayer. We stand before the Cenotaph, the “empty tomb” and before those known only unto God.

A time of sadness? Most surely.

Yet a time of hope. While standing before an empty tomb to the countless Glorious Dead might, on its own, be far from a sign of hope, for Christians the empty tomb has a far deeper resonance: the empty tomb of Jesus giving us hope of eternal life through his rising from the dead.

Our Lord suffered and died in a supreme act of sacrificial love. We recall our Saviour’s words in St John:

Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for his friends.

The fallen are our friends. We are the friends for whom they fell. There is a bond of trust between us and *if we break faith with those who died, they shall not sleep.*

Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon them, may they rest in peace. Amen.

+Paul Mason

Catholic Bishop of The Forces