Remembrance Day 2018

A sermon by Tom Frame (11/11/18)

Today marks the end of four years of national commemoration. Australia was changed by the Great War – as were the villages of Lake Bathurst and Tarago and the settlements at Taylors Creek and Currawang. Can I suggest that this season of commemoration has left us with three questions that we need to ponder. First, what have remembered? Second, how have we remembered? And third, why have we remembered? Let me deal with them in that order as I try to bring a Christian perspective to the answers.

It is a curious thing that we live in the present which we can manage, we look forward to the future which we can shape but make forays into the past which we cannot change. The past is a strange place where they did strange things. What have we remembered? We haven't so much remembered – because none of us was born when the Great War was fought – but we have told and re-told stories from a time that showed humanity at its best and at its worst. These stories are intended to help us manage the present and shape the future … by allowing us to avoid the mistakes of the past while drawing on the insights of those days. We have been reminded that of those deployed beyond these shores, 1 in 5 was killed and 1 in 3 was wounded. We have heard that the armistice declared 100 tears ago today was rich with hope but poor in prospect as the world was plunged into a war that was even more deadly two decades later, and that European tensions did not finally ease until 1989. We have been confronted by stories or grief and loss in families who never recovered from the tragedy of losing one or more loved ones … and never seeing their graves if their resting place was known. In sum, what we have remembered are the circumstances of a time we never want to see repeated. It was carnage, brutal and barbaric. The Great War for civilisation – the inscription on the campaign medal given to everyone who served – had required a descent into savagery.

The earliest Remembrance Day services hosted by the churches were essentially days of confession and contrition. People were called to prayer and to acts of penance. The new century had been greeted with hopes of expanded prosperity, fairer wages, better health and longer lives … hopes that were dashed by pride, arrogance and greed – as nation turned against nation as their rich inheritance of learning, industry and civility were counted as nothing. The churches which had "approved" the war were mortified with what they had sanctioned. What we ought to remember (to re-tell), in moments of honesty and candour, is the price of conceit, hubris and selfishness – writ large. And what need to remember is that war never gives birth to peace or prosperity, so any decision on the part of governments we elect to take up arms must consider what we remember of the last time, and the time before

that … and the need for humility and temperance and calm. Love of nation can become a perversion – if it obscures the unity of God's creative imprint on every woman and man.

How have we remembered? Over the past four years there have been many documentaries and dramas on television; the refurbishment of Great War memorials, the erection of new plaques and the refining of existing honour rolls. There have been countless commemorations and conflict over commemorations exploited by businesses and sporting codes seeking brand recognition. The numbers have been large and the sentiments have been sincere. But we have not found a fresh voice or a new approach to commemoration. We use the same misunderstood words and the same misguided ceremonies to tell stories that mean less and less to fewer and fewer people – because the world of 1914-18 is increasingly unintelligible to a generation of people who know nothing of history and little of what uniformed service entails.

The churches have been complicit in failing to update, modernise and contemporise the liturgies from the past and the ways in which they can be applied to our day. We have had too much sentimentality and nostalgia; to many stories of the great and the good when we might have been better served by accounts of men who were afraid and fled, who injured themselves in the hope of being evacuated, who were mentally traumatised and morally injured by what they had seen and done. If we had heard and seen more of this side of the Great War, I suspect new recruits to the Defence Force might have second thoughts … and we might be more attentive to the inner wounds of those we send to do things we would rather not know too much about. This season of commemoration might have spawned new liturgies and new hymns and new approaches to reflection that helped those without spiritual maturity to internalise the insights from the past to help us innovate for a better future. This might sound unfair but the churches have presumed an acquaintance with hymns and prayers and readings and invitations to confession and offers of absolution to a population that is unable to hear and heed them. We (and I count myself in this indictment) might and probably should have done better in terms of how we have remembered.

And finally, why have we remembered? As I pondered this question a poignant scene came to mind from Alan Bennett's discomforting play *The History Boys*. It was later made into a movie starring the late Richard Griffiths. The students, a group of un-privileged grammar school boys from the north of England seeking to enter Oxford and Cambridge, are taken on a trip of the local area by a young teacher who cynically likens educational achievement to success in a board game. The class is discussing the origins of the Great War. The teacher claims that Germany doesn't want war in 1914 and Britain is leading the arms race. So why fight? They come across a substantial granite Great War memorial of the kind seen throughout the Western world. It bears the names of local men who were killed between 1914 and 1918. Having hinted at British complicity in the origins of the Great War,

the teacher asks: so why does no-one admit this? He points to the memorial and answers his own question: 'that's why':

> The dead – the body count. We don't like to admit the war was even partly our fault because so many of our people died, and all the mourning has veiled the truth. It's not 'lest we forget'; it's 'lest we remember'. That's what all this is about – the memorials, the Cenotaph, the two minutes' silence. Because there is no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.

It is vintage Bennett, but does it contain an element of truth?

While Bennett's depiction of the causes of the Great War and the attribution of moral responsibility are contestable, there is a sense in which commemoration is an attempt to refashion the past into what we wished it had been because the facts are too difficult to decipher, the truth too hard to bear, culpability too close to home and redemption too elusive to grasp. The Great War was a human tragedy that revealed the fallacy of social evolution – the notion that humanity was on an inexorable march to perfection until the events of 1914–18 showed that animal savagery still resided in the human heart and even the most advanced nations were capable of the worst decadence.

Is it possible, then, that the tears shed on Remembrance Day are prompted not by 'the fallen' but by the fallen-ness of humankind, the realisation that men and women have deep within their own being the seeds of humanity's destruction? Remembrance Day leaves no room for optimism about the human condition. This is not to contend that armed conflict cannot be justified. Sometimes physical force is necessary and unavoidable if tyranny and evil are to be restrained. But the causes of human conflict stalk the human heart; it is only the consequences that can better be mediated. We weep, then, not for our war dead and the past but for ourselves and the present.

But weeping is a reaction; it is not a response. When the tears have ended, what shall we do? We might be wiser and we might be more honest … we might also be more willing to refuge in the things of God, the things of the spirit, knowing that possessions and power are not the marks of an advanced society or the signs of a better and happier life. As a nation and as a people, we can have possess everything the world can offer and yet be poor and miserable and comfortless. The riches of the Kingdom of God – love, hope and joy, compassion, generosity and kindness – these are gifts that cannot be held in one's hands or sold for profit. It is the balance between the physical and the spiritual that we have failed to pursue in the century since the Armistice. The war showed the poverty of possessions and the futility of power … and yet we still think that economics and politics define our society and determine affluence and achievement. Of all the things we might remember from these four years of commemoration, lest we forget that. Amen.