

A Remembrance Day Homily

Grahamstown Cathedral

10 November 2013

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Three days ago I stood on the banks of a river in KwaZulu-Natal, situated between the towns of Dundee, Vryheid and Nquthu. It is the site of a famous battle between amaZulu and the Voortrekkers on 16 December 1838. On one side of the river is the Blood River memorial, part of which is a circle (or *laager*) of life-size bronze ox-wagons – standing in the same position they occupied on the day of the battle. Across the river is the Ncome Museum, designed in the shape of the buffalo-horn formation that King Shaka's warriors used when launching their attack. The two museums are joined by a footbridge, which was closed for the duration of the time that I was there.

As I stood in that beautiful and yet deeply conflicted space, I was overwhelmed by the complexity of commemorating Remembrance Day in South Africa.

Today's events are in honour of a tradition established at the end of World War I in which people pause at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month (and hold services on the closest Sunday to this date) to remember those who died in war and to pray for peace. In South Africa, we live in a context that has been profoundly affected by wars both before and after World War I, making the act of remembering those affected by war a particularly challenging one.

The word "remember" implies that we are restoring something that has been dismembered – torn apart – and unremembered – forgotten, hidden – in some way. This is an important and honourable thing to do. People whose lives have become swept up in times of war have often had to make tough, courageous and heart-breaking choices in the midst of overwhelming circumstances. They fully deserve to be acknowledged for both their courage and vulnerability where that is appropriate. But, as this morning's reading from Ecclesiasticus reminds us, honouring the actions of our ancestors during times of war is not only about praising the "famous men". There are also those who were prophetic voices and counselled caution in the face of violence and aggression. And there are those whose names, faces and bodies have never been celebrated or honoured, who lie lost and forgotten in the sands of time. If we are to remember, in the sense of bringing together the whole of the histories we represent as we sit in this Cathedral today, we need to reflect deeply and compassionately on what these complexities mean.

We live in what is known as Frontier Country, here in Grahamstown. This Cathedral that we sit in today was built during a time of war and commemorates one side of the Frontier Wars. Many of us who sit here today are descendants of people who fought on different sides of these and subsequent wars, both here and on other shores. I would argue that those of us who lived through the apartheid years are a dismembered generation because of the history we lived through; many were forced to make choices about serving in the apartheid military or leaving the country for a life of exile to fight against the apartheid regime. How do we remember those involved in the apartheid wars in a way that honours the injunctions of so many of today's Bible readings to love one another? How do we honour the whole of who we are in ways that reflect the wholeness of God's love, a love that is indivisible from life itself?

In remembering the past here today, we stand on the cusp of the way the past shapes the future. How we remember, and help to heal, the wars of the past will shape the way future generations are affected by the legacies of past violence. So those of us who are together in this space today represent both the past and the future; a bridge between the two.

I am reminded of the work of Miroslav Volf, a Croatian who was tortured during the conflicts in the Balkans. In the course of coming to terms with what a Christian response to meeting his torturer would be, he wrote a book called *Exclusion and Embrace*. In it, he argues that societies that build peace are societies of embrace and inclusion. Societies of violence are those characterised by exclusion of different kinds.

It seems to me that a meaningful and appropriate commemoration of Remembrance Day needs to enable an embrace of the many legacies, memories and stories of war that we hold in our midst. Because healing from war is not complete until the whole has been acknowledged and the dead on all sides have been honoured. And the dead are not only those who have died physically, but also those who suffered trauma and have died emotionally. They are also those who live in families where there are dead and silent spaces of not knowing what happened to loved ones.

As we stand on this cusp between the past and the present, embracing the known and unknown memories of those who have died, we are also celebrating and creating life through our remembering. Both the lives of those who have gone and the life that is to come. And so I would like to close with an acclamation from the Community of St Hilda that helps us to do just that:

Be in love with life
wrestle with the chaos and the pain
with yourself and with others
spirit echoing Spirit
trusting in the victory of the vulnerable;
glimpsing the peace
the wholeness
the spaciousness
the justice
and the joy
that comes from following the Pioneer
made perfect in suffering;
striving and yearning and crying out
from the very depths and heights
of the world's anguish and the world's bliss
and so becoming friends and partners of God
in the divine creating.
(St Hilda's Community)