

Remembrance?

As November 11th comes around again, we are faced with the annual surge of 'remembrance' activities here in the UK – poppies, special 'services' and 'acts of remembrance', usually with all the local denominations joining together, these days often under the banner of 'Churches Together'.

As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, where do we stand with all this? Here I shall try to share some of my 'thinking-through'. You may or may not agree with what I write, but hopefully it may help us all to get to grips with some important issues.

My first and somewhat radical question is, 'Why do people get involved in remembrance-based activities?' Each one will have their own blend of motivations, but here are some that seem to be common:—

- 1) To honour those who gave their lives when fighting for this country.
- 2) To remember loved ones who died in battle.
- 3) To preserve the tradition of remembrance.
- 4) To contribute financially to those who have been injured and disabled in military service.
- 5) To join together with others in a patriotic ceremony.

I can see reasons why some people would want to follow these motives, but I ask myself whether I can honestly share in any of them, and perhaps especially whether it is relevant for born-again believers in the Lord Jesus Christ to get involved . . .

My next question is, 'If we were to start from scratch, would we (as born-again believers) see any need to initiate remembrance activities?' Another way of asking much the same question would be 'Are we going through these activities because they were started generations ago under the erroneous belief that Britain was a Christian country?' In those earlier years, 'the Church' (by which everyone meant the established Church of England) was seen as almost an arm of the state or at least of the establishment, so any national event that had the least hint of religious content would automatically be endorsed, encouraged or organised by that established 'state Church'.

As will be obvious to all, those days are past; but were they ever truly valid in the first place? Was Britain ever a 'Christian country'? And is remembering fallen soldiers in any way relevant to the life of the Church?

I believe the answer is 'No' on all these points. But before you stop reading in disgust, let's look at those questions in a different way . . .

Imagine, if you will, that you are a Christian believer in the Roman colony city of Philippi in Macedonia, around about AD 60. You and your fellow Gentile believers have come to faith in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, due in part at least to the involvement of an unusual man called Paul, who was a Jew by birth but also had Roman citizenship.

Many people in Philippi also prided themselves on having Roman citizenship, and some of them had objected to the words of Paul and his colleague Silas on the basis that their message seemed to go against Rome and its emperor.¹ They had been speaking about the fact that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, had been executed but then had risen from the dead and would be coming back to set up the Kingdom of God on the earth. You had heard the message and responded, along with many others, and now found yourself in a group, mostly Gentiles, some Roman citizens and a few Jews, a group that Paul and Silas called a 'church' – the 'called-out ones'.² You were discovering together the joys of your transformed lives and the power of the Holy Spirit in your midst.

All around you, the Roman army is busy on various campaigns, either to gain new territory or to make sure that they hold what they already have. Inevitably, they suffer casualties and one day the local army commander announces that there is going to be a memorial ceremony to remember 'the glorious dead' who have given their lives for the sake of the Roman Empire.

Will the commander come to your group and ask you to undertake some sort of religious programme to commemorate the fallen? Of course not! Even if he were aware of your existence, he would see no reason to involve you. Would such a ceremony be relevant to you and your fellow-believers? It would have no place in your fellowship life together, though obviously you might personally choose to be involved in some way if you knew anyone who had died in battle. As Paul would have told you, your meetings together as believers would be concentrating on seeing each other built up together, and celebrating or remembering soldiers who had died just would not fit in with that.

Is that so very different from our own situation today? Perhaps the main significant difference is that the UK has had a lot of Christian influence over the centuries, so there is this idea in some people's minds that this is – or was – a 'Christian country'. But I think we all know that there is really no such thing, and even the degree of Christian influence that there once was has faded significantly out of public life, along with the strange idea that all British people are in some way 'Christian'. There is nothing Christian about being British, and nothing British about being a Christian.

Then there is the idea that all religious groups will get together in order to make this act of remembrance. Why do people assume that religious people should be involved? Is it because it is a remembrance of death? With such widely varied concepts of life after death between different religions, very little could be expressed with which all could agree – except that these service personnel gave their lives. Full stop. That is as far as any 'inter-faith' remembrance ceremony can go.

¹ **Acts 16:19-21**

² The Greek word *ekklēsia*, translated 'church', literally means 'called out'.

Even in a situation like our small country village, where no non-Christian faiths have a visible corporate expression, there are still separate denominations, with varying degrees of insistence on the need for spiritual rebirth! Any joint endeavour like a 'service of remembrance' will inevitably function at the level of the 'lowest common denominator' – i.e. a sort of 'Christian religion' approach. We can be sure that there will be no sense of meeting together as brothers and sisters in the Lord, only as various types of 'church-goers'. What can be the possible value of such a ceremony? Paul told the Corinthians that everything in their meetings should be done in order to build each other up in the Lord,¹ and it is hard to see how such a gathering could have that effect.

Somehow, the national 'Churches Together' movement has got involved with acts of remembrance. About 30 years ago, when there was at least some level of understanding and common ground between the leaders of the congregations in our village, we decided to start doing some things together. Certainly part of my own motivation then was the optimistic hope that contact with others would enable a growing sharing of personal faith in the Lord Jesus. We considered adopting the title 'Churches Together' but rejected it in favour of 'Christians Together', for the simple reason that at least some of us had begun to realise that there really is only one church – those who are in Christ.

Now, all these years later, there seems to be a strange dichotomy: sometimes this grouping calls itself 'Churches Together' and sometimes 'Christians Together'. I am no longer involved, so I don't know what the thinking is, but it looks very like simply an 'umbrella' under which the various 'labels' can occasionally organise combined 'services'. There seems to be no sense of oneness; perhaps there never was and my early optimism was misplaced. Personally, I can no longer see any value in this grouping, whichever title it may choose, but this is the label under which the village's 'remembrance' is being organised this year.

Poppies! Chosen as a symbol of remembrance because of the hundreds of soldiers who died 'in Flanders fields', where red poppies grew rapidly and in abundance, they have now become internationally recognised as a symbol of remembrance. The proceeds from their sale are used to support needy ex-service personnel in various ways, which is obviously a 'worthy cause'. But I ask myself the questions, 'Shouldn't the government itself bear responsibility for the support of these people who have served their country?' and 'Why should it fall to voluntary organisations to provide this support?'

Patriotism. There are sure to be some reading these notes who will ask 'What about patriotism? Aren't you at all patriotic?' In response, I would say that am happy to live in the UK; it's the country of my birth, with many beautiful parts, and living conditions here are much better than in many other countries. We have friends and family here, but also in other places. And when I lived in India for 5 years, I began to feel that it was my home and that I could have lived there indefinitely. So my answer to the question is 'No, I am not particularly patriotic.'

¹ **1 Corinthians 14:26.** 'Edification' means 'building the house', i.e. the church.

Patriotism could almost be described as the glue which holds together many acts of remembrance. If we can find no other reason why we might want to remember in this way, the appeal to our love of our home country is designed to pull at our emotions in respect of all those who died defending it.

Without question, many of the freedoms which we now enjoy would have disappeared if the victory had not been won, but what do we achieve by the backward-looking 'remembrance'? Some would reply to say that by looking back on the horrors of world conflicts, we remind ourselves never to let it happen again. 'Never again' was a well-used phrase to remind the world not to allow another genocide like the one perpetrated by the Nazi regime, but today we see genocides in different situations and little or no action seems to be taken.

The whole tenor of 'remembrance' is military but it seems to me that there is a general reluctance to use military means to prevent fresh genocides or to quash existing ones. I am not advocating the proliferation of wars, but there seems to be an inconsistency between the stated aims of not allowing invasion and genocide and the refusal to engage militarily when they do occur. Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan are three current examples.

My general instincts are pacifist rather than belligerent, and I expect many or most people share them. But I find myself outraged when I see invasion, aggression and oppression against countries or racial groups, and can better understand why past national leaders felt the need to go to war to try to stop them.

However, despite all that, I find myself curiously detached, simply because of a greater loyalty, which also lies behind my lack of patriotism. I belong to a different kingdom.¹

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So, that is where I am at the moment, and pretty much where I have been for a number of years. I can see no value in being personally involved in any 'acts of remembrance', and can not understand why any born-again Christian would want to do so, except perhaps if they wanted to remember a deceased relative or loved one. Even then, I am sure that there are better ways of doing so.

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Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk

¹ There is a beautiful anonymous document from the 2nd Century, called [The Epistle to Diognetus](#). It describes how Christian believers of that time were observed and has some valuable lessons for us.