Sermon Remembrance Sunday 14 November 2021 St Luke’s Chelsea

Lockdown led me to binge lots of Scandi-Noir television. It felt right, for me, to be indulging in rather gloomy, wintry, greyness of that genre- I suppose it reflected my mood. The Bridge, Young Wallander, The Killing and especially ‘Ride upon the Storm’-The story of a dysfunctional Danish clergy family, headed by an over-ambitious priest desperate to be made bishop. No one in the family listens to nor hears the pain within their relationships; they cannot even truly remember why they are embittered, because the noise of family pride and place, expectation and anger obliterates any chance of space or silence in which to risk remembering. And particularly today, I’m reminded of the trauma of one of the sons, who has served as an army chaplain with Danish Peacekeeping forces in Iraq and the unresolved agony of that experience, which eats him up, so that no forward facing relationship can be built, renewed or endured because of the elephant in the room-namely in extremis, was he involved in the death of a child.

It is of course, a very real experience for many of those whom we, as a nation, ask to undertake such tasks in desperately complex, politically sensitive situations- whether on the ground in the air or at sea. And today we do well to remember that huge burden which we place upon the men and women, and the families, of our armed forces as well as the peoples whose lives and livelihoods are destroyed by powers beyond their control and those who seek to impose their will by force

In this borough we have recently received some 600 refugees from Afghanistan, while they await re-settlement across the UK. I spoke to one family who had brought with them a photograph, a tablecloth, and a doll for their child as well as a change of underwear for the three family members. What, I wondered led them to choose these objects- was it what was to hand, easily packed in a hurry, or were these things particularly significant. But on reflection, of course, they also brought their memories, their language, their music, their diet, their stories. It is a powerful reminder- for those refugees, as much as for those soldiers on mission, that we are never just people of the moment-our identity is always bound up with what has made us to be as we are, the places, the people, the culture,- we are not finished products, complete, whole, but daily exist at a point in a developing stream.

I, you, your comrades, colleagues, the refugees in our midst and those left behind, are always going to exist in a cluster of memories and experiences: some raw, some still processing or some seemingly worked through- underscoring the truth that we do not progress though life in a straight line or a constant pace.

Like that family in ‘Ride upon the storm’, we’ve all had experience of something or someone activating what we had thought to be a buried memory. It happens with joys and treasured memories, like the photograph and the tablecloth of that Afghan family, but it also happens with painful memories we’d rather do without- of hurt, betrayal, unresolved clashes. Suddenly the past becomes the present and threatens the future.

That, of course, is precisely why the Church, the Christian community can’t let go of the past. Day by day we return to the narrative of the Bible and the reading of the familiar sagas, prophecies, wisdom, Parables or stories knowing that sometimes we’ll be stuck, but sometinmes, something will leap off the page to challenge, to change to confirm. But it wouldn’t happen if we didn’t return to the stories, the people, the engagements of the faith, if we didn’t remember and, thereby, allow ourselves to be re-membered differently.

Remembering the past, openly, honestly, critically, allows the future to be different. It is not what the poet TS Eliot called ‘ringing the bell backwards;’- it doesn’t just cancel out what has happened, but is an alarm, an alert, to letting the past inform the present in order to influence the future. Remembering has to be like letting light into more and more of the dusty, hidden corners of our lives and our identity, as if to reveal a wider horizon, a bigger landscape of possibility and humanity, while acknowledging the what, the who and the why we have become as we are. Remembering is costly and can never be a clinging to the past, against all the odds, idealizing what we think we once were, it has to allow for growth, change, development. But not to engage with the past, as if we are cut loose from all that has made us who we are, is equally destructive, rendering us as people and communities but flotsam and jetsam, subject to arbitrary fashion or influence.

Christians believe that when they say Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever we are not idolizing a historic figure of 2000 years past, in a land and culture so unlike our own. No. We are asserting that in Jesus Christ the life of God is to be seen, engaged with and inhabited. Jesus, the night before he was betrayed, tortured, and ritually killed, begged his friends to do this in remembrance of him- to take the tokens of his life and theirs and see in them the possibility of God acting for good. He does not promise a wiping clean of the slate, an easy life, a bright future, but a union with the divine which knows new life, by the emptying out of all that mars our humanity. Remembering our past in order to have a new future, releases us from the mistakes and brokenness and is a step on the journey to that promised end in which Christ embraces every part of me, in forgiving and renewing love. But the costly first step on that journey needs to be taken by us remembering in honesty, all that makes us who we are, traveling with little possession, but always possessing the need to travel further into the forgiving love of God.

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