

# We Remember

*A Sermon for Remembrance Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> November 2020; Matthew 25.1-13.*

I've been thinking a lot this week about memory and identity.

We each have a personal narrative of the past and how it has shaped us into the people we are today – and many of us will also have a specific narrative about how we have encountered God in our lives and where those encounters have guided us (our testimonies of faith) – but it is the strange construct of *cultural* or *collective* memory which leaves me pondering.

How *can* a group of people remember something? We do not have a single, shared consciousness – and many of us may not even have experienced the thing which we are professing to remember. And yet we do.

“We will remember them” is a familiar refrain, one that we use every year at this time as part of our season of remembrance.

This is an act of *Cultural Memory* - drawing together in relation to each other our memory of the contemporised past, our culture, and our society.<sup>1</sup>

Cultural Memory is intrinsically tied up with our Cultural Identity – it is the narrative of who we are and the lens through which we – as a community - interpret our past, present, and future.

This type of remembering requires active participation – the passing on of stories, interpretation, ritual.

Our gospel reading this morning is a call to alertness: as the wise bridesmaids ensure that they have enough oil to fuel their lamps through the night (and are therefore ready to meet the bridegroom whenever he comes), so too must we be refuse to be absent – in our lives, in our faith, and in our remembrance.

Indeed, much of our practice of faith is based on active remembrance – in our liturgy, in our scriptures, our preaching, our sacraments – *we remember and incarnate the events of our salvation.*

On Remembrance Sunday, we actively remember the losses of War – a practice which has been absorbed into our national identity and will continue to be reinterpreted and reincarnated as each generation takes over the remembering.

At St Mark's, we make a point to expand this remembering beyond the casualties of martial conflict to include all whose lives have been diminished by war and all who make sacrifices to bring about lasting peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Assmann, Jan, and John Czaplicka. “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.” *New German Critique*, no. 65, 1995, pp. 125–133. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/488538](http://www.jstor.org/stable/488538). Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.

Today, we also invite you to include in your remembering all who, during this pandemic, are at the front-line – risking their lives and wellbeing for ours.

In the years to come, I wonder - how will we remember this season of the coronavirus?

As Malala Yousafzai said in our first reading, ‘our world will never be the same after this pandemic’<sup>2</sup> – on the other side of COVID (even if it is yet difficult to imagine) we *shall* emerge changed by our experiences.

But beyond individual change and personal memory, how can we ensure that our *cultural memory and identity* follow?

What stories will we tell? How will we interpret them? What rituals will we begin?

We will have a role in shaping how this crisis will be remembered, and how that remembrance will be used to shape our society as it is remembered and reincarnated by future generations. We *must* be active in this if we want our society to change for the better.

And perhaps, in doing so, we will also come to re-evaluate how we mark remembrance in other areas.

Let us pray,

God of our longing,  
hear our prayers  
protect our dreams,  
and listen to our silent hopes.

Deal gently with our pain,  
speak to our sadness,  
and remove the barriers  
that imprison our spirit.

Shed your light  
where shadows are cast,  
that we may feel your warmth  
and know your presence.

Give us courage  
to hold fast to our vision  
that we may build our world  
and create our future.

Amen.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Dear NHS: 100 Stories to Say Thank You*. Edited by Adam Kay. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Prayer by Annabel Shilson-Thomas/CAFOD