

REMEMBERING

November is the month for remembering. As winter begins to close in and the days shorten we start with All Saints' Day, when we remember the saints and martyrs of Old: we continue with all Souls Day when we remember in prayer our loved ones who have died; and then comes Remembrance Day, the day on which those who have died in the wars of the last century are honoured and remembered.

Listen to this account from the Manchester Guardian of the first Remembrance or Armistice, Day, the 11th November 1919:-

‘ The first stroke of 11 produced a magical effect. The tram cars glided into stillness, motors ceased to cough and fume and stopped dead, and the mighty-limbed dray-horses hunched back upon their loads and stopped also, seeming to do it of their own volition...Someone took off his hat and with a nervous hesitancy the rest of the men bowed their heads also. Here and there an old soldier could be detected slipping unconsciously into the posture of attention. An elderly woman wiped her eyes and the man beside her looked white and stern. Everyone stood very still...

‘The hush deepened. It had spread over the whole city and become so pronounced as to impress one with a sense of audibility. It was... a silence which was almost pain... And the spirit of memory brooded over it all.’

Choir – Where have all the flowers gone – Seeger arr Peacock

Remembering is very important: it helps us create a sense of our own identity, and gives us comfort, reassurance and a sense of historical perspective. We are not just creatures of the moment, here today and gone tomorrow, but part of the living stream of history which stretches back into the past and runs on into the future.

Remembering can be both pleasant and painful, as we recall joys and sorrows, pain and pleasure, but it can also be a healing experience, an encounter with the past which can renew us and restore us. We can look back on the past in several ways, and the first of these is nostalgia:-

I remember, I remember

I remember, I remember,
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn;
He never came a wink too soon,
Nor brought too long a day,

But now, I often wish the night
Had borne my breath away.

I remember, I remember,
The roses, red and white;
The violets, and the lily-cups,
Those flowers made of light!
The lilacs where the robin built,
And where my brother set
The laburnum on his birthday –
The tree is living yet!

I remember, I remember,
Where I was used to swing;
And thought the air must rush as fresh
To swallows on the wing;
My spirit flew in feathers then,
That is so heavy now,
And summer pools could hardly cool
The fever on my brow!

I remember, I remember,
The fir trees dark and high;
I used to think their slender tops
Were close against the sky:
It was a childish ignorance,
But now 'tis little joy
To know I'm farther off from Heav'n
Than when I was a boy.

Thomas Hood 1799 – 1845

Choir – The way we were – Bergmann/Bergmann and Hamlich

The trouble with nostalgia of recalling the past is that it makes the past out to be better than it was: it locks it away in a glass case and makes it unreal.

If nostalgia will not do as a way of remembering nor will that other way of looking back, resentment. Resentment looks back in bitterness and wishes things had been different; it looks back in anger at people or mistakes. A First World War Chaplain and poet Geoffrey Studert Kennedy wrote out of his own experience of the trenches and expresses something of that anger at the waste of war in this poem:-

WASTE

Waste of Muscle, waste of Brain,
Waste of Patience, waste of Pain,
Waste of Manhood, waste of Health.
Waste of Beauty, waste of Wealth,

Waste of Blood, and waste of Tears,
Waste of Youth's most precious years,
Waste of Glory, waste of God, -
War!

Choir – Justorum Animae – Stanford

and another poem by Studdert Kennedy reflects bitterly on the way God seems to snatch away even the little joys and solace of memory.

Missing – Believed Killed
On reading a Mother's Letter

'Twere heaven enough to fill my heart
If only one would stay,
Just one of all the million joys
God gives to take away.

If I could keep one golden dawn,
The splendour of one star,
One silver glint of yon bird's wing
That flashes from afar.

If I could keep the least of things
That make me catch my breath
To gasp with wonder at God's world,
And hold it back from death.

It were enough; but death forbids
The sunset flames to fade,
The velvet petals of this rose
Fall withered-brown-decayed.

She only asked to keep one thing,
The joy-light in his eyes:
God has not even let her know
Where his dead body lies.

O Grave, where is thy victory?
O Death, where is thy sting?
Thy victory is ev'rywhere,
Thy sting's in ev'rything.

Choir – Requiem and Kyrie – Durufle

So nostalgia and resentment ultimately won't work because they are trying to make out of the past something it wasn't. The best way of remembering is what the Greeks called bringing of the past into the present, so that we can use it creatively for the future. This redemptive element of memory is very important, because it makes remembering the opposite of dismembering – putting things back together again, so

that we are empowered to build better things for the future. It's something that happens every week in the Communion Service as we break bread and drink wine in remembrance of Jesus' death on the Cross.

Anamneses, the use of remembering to redeem the past, to heal, refresh and restore. We all have inside us the broken pieces that need putting together again, and we can't do that unless we use the precious gift of memory – it may bring tears as well as joy, as scenes come back to life, days of childhood, times of romance, occasions of intimacy, celebration, reunion. As the song says:-

Try to remember when life was so tender
That no-one wept except the willow.
Try to remember when life was so tender
That dreams were kept beside your pillow.
Try to remember when life was so tender
That love was an ember about to billow.
Try to remember and if you remember
Then follow, follow, follow.

Choir – Try to remember – Jones/Schmidt

They all felt awkward and unhappy suddenly because it was a sort of goodbye they were saying, and they didn't want to think about it.

Then Christopher Robin called out, 'Pooh!'

'Yes,' said Pooh.

'When I'm...when...Pooh!'

'Yes, Christopher Robin?'

'I'm not going to do nothing anymore'

'Never again?'

'Well, not so much. They won't let you.'

Pooh waited for him to go on but he was silent again.

'Yes, Christopher Robin?' said Pooh helpfully.

'Pooh, when I'm ... you know, when I'm not doing nothing, will you come up here sometimes?'

'Just me?'

'Yes, Pooh.'

'Will you be here too?'

'Yes Pooh, I will be really, I promise I will be, Pooh.'

'That's good,' said Pooh

'Pooh, promise you won't forget about me, ever. Not even when I'm a hundred.'

'I promise,' he said.

'Pooh, whatever happens, you will understand, won't you?'

'Understand what?'

'Oh, nothing.' He laughed and jumped to his feet.

'Come on!'

‘Where?’ said Pooh.

‘Anywhere,’ said Christopher Robin.

The House at Pooh Corner

A.A. Milne