

## *Remembrance Day 2017*

In this week's Newsletter to parents from one of our Parish Primary Schools there is a *Spiritual Reflection for Remembrance Day*. The *Reflection* recalls the evacuation from Dunkirk at the beginning of the Second World War and the terrible loss of life that occurred then, and was to continue for the duration of the War.

On this day we recall how so many laid down their lives so that we might be able to live with the freedom we now enjoy. In the *Reflection* a newspaper editor is quoted as writing: 'Recently I heard someone ask how long we have to keep up this Remembrance Day stuff. The short answer is as long as those guys in the war graves stay dead and I'm free because of it'.

That sentiment needs to be expressed. Surely we need continually to hold in respect those who made the ultimate sacrifice of life itself for our sakes.

But there is another consideration that is important to have, which is that *never forgetting may itself be the cause of continuing blood feuds and atrocities*.

Last year (2016) the author David Rief wrote a provocative book entitled *'In Praise of Forgetting'* in which he makes a number of salient and salutary points.

He argues that to **forget** history and the many atrocities which feature in it might be better for our psyches and national story than glorifying our response or avenging the wrong-doings.

He draws attention to many examples of long-lived memories of past defeats, humiliations, or cruelties giving rise to present conflicts, or fostering them.

He observes that the homicidal strife in the Balkans in the late 1990s had its roots six centuries (!) earlier in the Serbian defeat in the battle of Kosovo in 1389.

He points out that the historical injustices suffered by the people of Ireland led to new injustices in our own life times: a cycle of revenge and violence which proved so difficult to bring to an end.

He demonstrates how the same dialectic works in the modern Middle East, where memories of past exploitation and cruelties stoke up feelings of humiliation and outrage. These are used by despotic dictators to turn the seething anger of the crowd away from them and towards foreign scapegoats. This is the narrative of al-Qaeda and ISIS.

In conclusion Rief says that *while a complete amnesia of history should certainly be avoided sometimes forgetting the past is the only viable path to forgiveness and peace*. **'Obsessive retrospection is a formula for unending vendetta'**.

In an article in The Guardian last week by the journalist Simon Jenkins a similar appeal is made: *Instead of wallowing in past traumas let's consign them to the history books and move on*.

In the body of his text Jenkins writes: 'We are told we must remember, 'lest we forget' and thus avoid the same mistakes again. How many Remembrance Days does it take for that to come true? *'Learning the lesson'* has long been history's chief sales pitch. It must also be its greatest failure'.

'We should not be remembering but forgetting', he writes. 'Almost all the conflicts in the world are caused by **too much remembering**: refreshing religious divisions, tribal feuds, border conflicts, humiliations and expulsions. Why else but for memory does Sunni fight Shia, or Hindu fight Muslim? India and Pakistan seem unable to get over memories of Partition. What ancient grievances motivated Myanmar's current viciousness against the Rohingya?

Nelson Mandela's great ambition in 1990s South Africa was to pass through the gates of 'truth and reconciliation' and draw a line under his country's recent history. He sought 'closure'.

The leaders of East Timor, liberated in 2002 from a quarter of a century of brutal and exploitative oppression by the Military-dominated regime of Indonesia, opted not for revenge or retribution but for reconciliation. They sought new beginnings, to put the dreadful past behind and to forge a new relationship with their former oppressors.

This choice of theirs was certainly **pragmatic** - the best way to enable the building up of their young nation and create a place for it in the regional and international community. But it was also very **principled**, based on a very Christian belief that yesterday's enemies can become, and should become, today's friends.

In his article in last Thursday's *Guardian*, Simon Jenkins concludes:

'Remembering is easy. Forgetting is hard - in personal relationships and in a nation's collective response to the world around it. The task before us is not to ignore some past event but rather to view it in proportion, [in its context], to find some compromise between past and present. Throughout history, societies that do this, that manage to 'let the dead bury their dead', have tended to succeed and move forward.

Those that cannot forget, that wander the stony paths of their past and drink at the rancid well of grievance, are those that decay from within.

Britain should write the wars of the 20th century into its history books, and move on. It is time to **remember the future.**'

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*In Praise of Forgetting.* **David Rief**, Yale, 2016.

'Too much remembering causes wars. It's time to forget the 20th Century'. **Simon Jenkins**, *The Guardian*, 9.11.17.