

Romans 8:31-39 : Kohima Memorial Service : York Minister : 6 July 2023

My generation, and my parent's generation, have no direct experience of war. I have never held a gun or worn a uniform and I have never felt the fear of knowing that the next day, or the next moment, might be my last.

My grandparents however, were all involved with the Second World War and, on an occasion like this, my grand father Jack is much on my mind. In 1942, he was 2,500 miles away from Kohima, in Singapore, where he was captured by the Japanese, and sent to the jungle prison camps made famous by the film *Bridge over the River Kwai*. He spent 3 years there in horrendous circumstances, brutalised by the prison guards, starved of decent food and riddled with tropical illnesses.

My grandfather had a book called *Miracle on the River Kwai*. Written by Ernest Gordon, who was a prisoner with him, it tells the story of what happened in those brutal jungles. My grandfather always hated the *Bridge over the River Kwai*, which he considered Hollywood nonsense, but this book, he said, this was how it really was.

My grandfather died a few years ago now, but reading this book brings him to life again. I feel that I know him better now, and as I remember him, having read the book, my memories are richer and fuller. This remembering, like our remembering today, is more than just a good thing to do; it is an essential part of our humanity.

But why do we remember? Why do we hold Memorial services? Why, after so many years, do people still turn up on Remembrance Sunday? Why is the Kohima Educational Trust still so important? Why are we here today?

The obvious reason is that we made a promise to do so. Individually, and as a nation, we promised that we would never forget the sacrifices made by those who have fought on our behalf, and those who do so today. And that general promise was made very specific by Gordon Graham, when he and others founded your organisation. They promised to repay the debt to the Naga people, and to support children into education. And that's a promise that we keep by being here now. And it's a promise that we keep by telling the stories of those who suffered and died in Kohima. And even in an age which is fickle and wary of commitment, and after all these years, we remain true to this promise.

And there is a second reason why we remember. Who we are today is shaped by the events of the past - in fact we can only understand our present by knowing the past. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said, "*Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.*"

By researching and re-telling the stories of the past, we unpack the reasons why we are as we are today. And as we better understand the past, we more fully know the present, so we can make choices for the future. The stories of those who served and died aren't there simply for information, they are there to remind us what it was like to serve in the jungles of Garrison Hill, or in the storms of the Atlantic, or in heat of Helmand; what it was like to be caught up in a war that's not of your making. They remind us that real people, just like you and me, suffered terrible things in the wars of the 20th century and continue to suffer today. And as we read

their stories, we cannot but commit ourselves to building to a world in which young lives, military and civilian, need not be wasted in war.

And so we don't look backwards to be maudlin, nor to wish that we could return to the way things were. We look back in order to avoid the mistakes of the past and so we can shape a safer and better future.

And a clue to a third reason to remember lies in the word itself. We re-member. All those millions of men and women who died, all those names on War Memorials up and down this country and in fields far from here, they belong to us. Their bodies were scattered across the jungles of Asia, the fields of Europe and the deserts of North Africa. But we remain 'members' together. So when we remember, we 're-member', we bring together something that has been torn apart. When we re-member we put back together lives and bodies that were dis-membered, both literally and figuratively. To re-member is to ensure that war and suffering do not have the final word.

The book that my grandfather passed on gives all the horrific details of life building the jungle railways; the casual beatings, the forced labour, the constant battle with infection and illness. The book tells the story of evil. But the reason my Grandfather loved it, wasn't because it described how bad things were. The book is called the *The Miracle on the River Kwai* and the miracle it describes was one of faith. The author, like my grandfather, arrived in Singapore without any real belief in God, but there in those grim jungles, surrounded by death, he came to faith. There, in the least likely circumstances, he discovered that God is alive and at work, even in the worst of places and in the most terrible of situations. There in the jungle God remembered him and found him.

And that was also my grandfather's experience. Like so many of those who fought, he rarely spoke of his experiences - but he did talk often about God, and about love and faith. And he said that he learnt about them on the River Kwai.

Just after the camps were liberated, the book's author wrote this

'I had seen at first hand the cruelty of a totalitarian regime. I knew something of suffering and what it meant to look death in the face. I knew the depths to which men could sink and the heights to which they could rise. I could speak knowledgeably of despair, but also of hope; of hatred, but also of love; of man without God, but also of man sustained by God. I knew the power of the demonic, and I knew the greater power of the Holy Spirit'

We remember to keep our promise;

We remember to learn from the mistakes of the past and to build peace in the future;

We re-member, to make whole that which was broken;

We remember that in all things, all places, all horrors, hope, faith and love are stronger than the powers of darkness and death;

We remember them, because God remembers us.