

The Memory Box

In homes for older people in the United States, they sometimes have a memory box at the door of a bedroom. It is really more of a glass frame than a box, despite its name. It might contain some army medals, certainly some photographs, maybe an old golf ball or two, a once loved flute. You know the sort of thing. When I read about it the nurse said “Every patient has one by their door. It’s a way to let everyone know about you”. In the context of dementia it strikes me both as appropriate and as uncomfortable. How can you sum up a life in a memory box? And yet, without the memories...? In the memories is the meeting.

Today is Remembrance Sunday. What shall we put in a Memory Box for Remembrance Sunday? Some thoughts are too deep for sermons. Only poetry will do. It might be Wilfred Owen, who knew Morningside well. But what I chose in this Memory Box is a poem written by the Scots Makar Jackie Kay about her grandfather, who had fought at The Somme. In the poem her father remembers his father.

*It wisnae men they sent tae war.
It wis boys like the Bantams
– wee men named efter
a small breed o' chickens,
or later: a jeep, a bike, a camera.
That needy fir soldiers they drapped height
Restriction; so small men came to war.
As a prisoner, my faither's weight fell.
And years later, the shrapnel fray the Somme
Shot oot, a wee jewel hidden in his left airm.*

Irene and I once had the dreadful privilege of spending Remembrance-tide in Flanders Fields and at the Menin Gate. Among the thousands of names inscribed on the gate you come across something like this “A. Smiley, served as A McPhail”. What that means is that these were boys who enlisted underage and so under a false name: giving up their lives in

the trenches of Ypres at fourteen years of age. And it was not only the sons of miners. In 1910 a cricket match took place at Lord's. It was a schools match between Eton and Harrow, the two top English private schools. Of the 22 who took part, eight were to die in the slaughter of the Western Front

Let's put a Flak Jacket in our Memory Box today. This one belongs to my friend JJ Chalmers. You will have heard of JJ because of his broadcasts of the Invictus Games. His father, former Moderator of the General Assembly, is our neighbour in Dunfermline. JJ was wounded when he was serving in Afghanistan; and he has shown tremendous courage in overcoming terrible wounds and putting together a broken life. Sad to say, it is only when you know someone involved in a conflict that the true dangers and pain become real. There have been so many families in Edinburgh who have had to learn that sad lesson over the years. And in modern wars, especially in modern wars, the world has had to learn that those who die in war are increasingly civilians: women and children and the very old. Their memory is very precious at Remembrance time.

This is to be a Christian Remembrance: so we will remember those who were our enemies as well. For sixteen years the congregation of which I was minister in Edinburgh shared Remembrance worship with the German-speaking congregation of that city. That helped to make it a truly Christian observance: wounds and bereavement know no national boundaries. So our Memory Box will have

something German,

Music

and something Japanese. This vase.

And there must be a Bible. I remember hearing a Sergeant Major of the Black Watch reading the Bible at the Remembrance Service at Camp Dogwood at the height of the war in Iraq. He read from the 46th Psalm: "Come, behold the works of the Lord...He makes wars to cease to the end

of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear. Be still and know that I am God”

This sermon was bound to reach the Bible, because the people of the Bible understood the power of the Memory Box. They called their Memory Box the Ark of the Covenant. It was the box which carried the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. It carried the nation’s most powerful memory: the memory of the great deliverance from Egypt, leading them to Mt Sinai and the holiness of the presence of God and the gift of the Law of God to the people. This was the gift which made them who they were - God’s special, covenanted people. We read of the tremendous drama and sense of awe with which they brought the Ark of the Covenant, the Memory Box, into Solomon’s newly dedicated Temple. They brought it in singing the 24th Psalm “Ye gates lift up your heads, that the king of glory may come in”. In this tremendous moment of the presence of God the meeting was in the memory.

And then the Memory Box was lost. Lost, and never found again. Did you see the film “Raiders of the Lost Ark”? It is about one of the theories, that the Pharaoh Shishak plundered the Temple and carried the Ark off to Egypt. Who knows? But it was never found: and I think you could say that Israel was never the same again. What does it mean to a people when they lose their memory box? Where is Scotland without her history? Where are we when we lose our memories? What is Edinburgh without its memories? Where is the church of Jesus Christ when it forgets? The meeting is in the memory.

In Scottish communion services as bread and wine are brought into church we often sing the 24th Psalm “Ye gates, lift up your heads, that the king of glory may come in”. It is a deliberate re-enacting of the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant into the temple: the Memory Box comes among God’s people. And for the people of the new Covenant the Memory Box holds bread and wine. All through this sermon I have been saying “In the memory is the meeting”. Which is exactly what happens in the repeated unrepeatable holiness of the Lord’s Supper. “Take this...this is my body... Do this in remembrance of me”. The meeting is in the memory.

This year marks the centenary of the Russian Revolution; and it is clear that Mr Putin does not know what to do with the history. We had a dramatic illustration of trying to forget that history the year after the Berlin Wall fell. We were in St. Petersburg, sailing down the River Neva. I had the guide book in front of me; and I nudged Irene and said "Round this next corner we will see real history. The first building around the corner will be the Smolny Institute. This was Lenin's headquarters during the Russian Revolution: the building in which he invented a country". At that very moment the boat turned around and proceeded back down the river. So that we would not see the Smolny Institute: so that we would not remember Lenin. They were rewriting Russian history so that it went 1915, 1916, 1917, 1991, 1992, 1993. An attempt to lose the memory of the Soviet years. You can understand it: but it could not be healthy. Perhaps the seeds of the social turmoil which is Russia today are in that desperate attempt to throw away their memory box.

For Christian people the memory box must not be thrown away, as in St Petersburg. Nor must it be lost, as in Solomon's temple.

In that memory box which is ours there is finally one solitary figure. Born in poverty. Living as a prince in his father's world, loving the least and the last and the lost. Facing the worst the world could do for the sake of God and the world. "He came to his own, and his own received him not". In our memory box is one solitary man with his hands stretched out in brutal pain: and as he dies, he says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do".

If you ever saw the film Ben Hur, of course you will remember the chariot race. But you might have forgotten the closing scene. Ben-Hur, full of rage and war and violence, comes away from watching the crucifixion of Jesus. He is sobbing as he whispers, "I heard him say, Father forgive them, for they know not what they do".