

## **Intimations of Immortality – A Homily for Remembrance Sunday**

*Wisdom of Solomon 6.12–16*

*1 Thessalonians 4.13–18*

*Matthew 25.1–13*

Today we remember those who have lost their lives on the field of battle in service of our country. We do this not to glorify war or to claim that it is a sweet and fitting thing to die for our homeland, but to mark war's terrible cost, the sacrifice made by others and renew our commitment to peace. Yet in trying times such as these, it can be a struggle to remember even the simplest things of everyday life. In our wearied state, it seems too much to ask that we should remember the casualties of past wars.

But remembrance Sunday is about more than simply remembering events of the past. It is about defending the vital nature of memory itself, especially in times of crisis. For the Christian understanding of memory is that it is not just about facts or past events. Memory is, fundamentally, about recalling our origin in God. It is about embracing and living within our vital interconnection with all things in a whole embraced by God. This sense of memory lies at the heart of our personality, conscience, and attentiveness to the world. It is the foundation of language. It is the fertile soil of our imagination and creativity; the guiding star for thought and action. It gives us the tangible link to others that allows us to know and love others as ourselves. When not reduced to recording details in time, memory is the temporal gateway to an eternal present that breaks into our reality as a wellspring of hope amid war, disaster, and plague. Memory is our true home awash with the intensity of child-like wonder, whether we be young or old.

This sense of memory is evoked beautifully in William Wordsworth's poem the 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.' There Wordsworth says:

*But trailing clouds of glory do we come*

*From God, who is our home:*

*Heaven lies about us in our infancy!*

Wordsworth laments the times we lose sight of the childlike core of our memory and vision of eternity due to life's trials.

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,*

*The earth, and every common sight,*

*To me did seem*

*Apparelled in celestial light,*

*The glory and the freshness of a dream.*

But he also rejoices in the rediscovery of this vision as an adult through the imagination of our hearts especially in the face of sorrow and loss.

*Thanks to the human heart by which we live,*

*Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,*

*To me the meanest flower that blows can give*

*Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

As Wordsworth implies our capacity to gather together all things in our memory in a way that opens us beyond ourselves is not something we make up ourselves. And yet, we can only access this deep sense of memory together with others through the creative medium of words and images.

We see this at work in our act of remembrance today as we face the horrific stories of war. By this act we don't seek just facts but to enfold our lives and the lives of those who have died into a larger story that embraces all who have lived and died in service of others; a story that opens up to the living bond between all things in God. And to remember like this we must use words and images differently; weaved

together with ritual, poetry, music, and silence – all shimmering with intimations of immortality amid suffering.

Thus, we lay a wreath made up of the same red poppies that grow among the graves of the fallen, first evoked in the poem “In Flanders Field” by a Canadian doctor (John McCrae) after he had witnessed the death of his friend in 1915. The wreath is a simple yet profound sacramental gesture that uses nature’s meanest flower to tenderly open our memory to thoughts too deep for tears.

And then the language of poetry evokes within the mysterious depth of our memory, an unbreakable solidarity with the fallen. Again, we use words inflected by the real experience of Robert Binyon who served on the frontline at the First World War.

*‘They shall grow not old,  
as we that are left grow old;  
age shall not weary them,  
nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun  
and in the morning,  
we will remember them.’*

Next music guides our memory beyond words to yet deeper, more intimate and cosmic connections. The Last Post is played on a solitary bugle. Conventionally marking the end of the day in barracks, its haunting tone transcends its military context penetrating our hearts with the portents of death.

This draws us into a solemn silent vigil. This is no mere absence that we need fill with the noise of our own thoughts about war. It is a call to enter the stillness and fullness beating at the heart of our memory in its vital relationship to others in God’s eternal hope.

This comes to sudden and vivid expression when the bugle plays the Reveille – the music used to rouse soldiers from sleep but now repurposed to sound out a defiant note of new life.

Our act of remembrance concludes with what is known as the Kohima epitaph: *When you go home tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow we gave our today.* These words again escape the context of war and capture the essence of what it means to truly remember others. For we arrive home not only through sharing stories of sacrifice and service, but by living this life of service in our own lives.

Here the act of Remembrance finds its true meaning embedded within the Eucharist. The words, imagery and poetry of scripture, together with the song, music and silences of worship, and above all the gestures of the sacrament make present in our world the love of God revealed in Christ crucified and risen. In Christ, God shows that he forgets no-one by promising to raise both the dead and alive with, as St Paul says, the sound of God's trumpet. Situating our acts of remembrance today and every day within the context of the memorial of Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice is, as the parable in our Gospel describes, to fill up on the oil that keeps the lamp of memory burning bright so that we might be attentive to the many ways Christ appears in our troubled world. To meet him, feast with him, and invite others to his table.

This is also why Remembrance Sunday is only properly understood in light of All Saints and All Souls. Though wearied by the crises of our own time and unable to gather, we are not separated from each other or the company of the fallen. Rather we stand firm on the bedrock of our communion in God, in solidarity with God's saints in every age, together with the souls whom we treasure in our hearts and all other human beings, to reach out to all in need to make God's love present in human society. And we do this by confronting suffering, fatigue and despair, war, disease and anxiety with grace-filled imagination that clothes all things with healing celestial light and rejuvenates our tired

hearts and broken bodies with Christ's fearless child-like openness to God's promise of peace and love that comes trailing on clouds of everlasting glory.