

“MEMORIALS (Mark 50)”
Mark 14:12-26

Remembrance Sunday. One of those days we keep year by year, often without any real sense of what it's all about. At least, a growing number of people who have never had any close experience of war find themselves at a loss to know exactly what's going on. For anyone under the age of sixty in Britain, there can be no personal experience of war unless they have been sent abroad to fight or have had a very close relative in such a position. And yet we still observe the conventions of keeping silence, wearing poppies, trying to show some reverence when it's demanded. It is a community occasion, an occasion that draws us together in a shared recognition that we need to be grateful for what we have in terms of peace and relative stability.

An occasion such as today provides us with a focus for our gratitude. We pause to consider (I hope) that we are very fortunate to be able to live in a part of the world where war – and all the dreadful consequences of war such as rationing, evacuation, bereavement, fear – has been unknown for nearly six decades. Together we express our thanks – thanks to God and thanks for the many who gave their own lives as a sacrifice to win our freedom (although there may have been many who were unaware of quite what they were doing, especially in the First World War).

And to help us in our thanksgiving we have the symbols which are paraded year by year before the crowds in Whitehall and amongst the scattered knots of elderly veterans in village churchyards and provincial market squares. There are, of course, the trophies of militarism – flags and standards, medals and mementoes – but there are also the silent stone witnesses of cenotaphs and carved plaques. And the ubiquitous poppies that we all wear, if not with pride then with a sense that we are participating in something beyond ourselves. Poppies that speak of the ravaged fields of France and Flanders, that are a symbol of hope after the insanity of trench warfare.

And even if we never even pause to consider it, we daily enjoy the measure of freedom that our forbears won for us – a freedom from the oppression of foreign armies, even if our lives are regimented by the commercial concerns of multinational companies; a freedom from the indoctrinating of our thoughts by foreign dictators, even if during every waking moment we are bombarded by the idolatry of transnational media moguls: a freedom from the repression of our religion, even if we are constantly battling the creeping anaesthetising of our moral sensibilities by the rise of secularism. But we are free and for remembering that, such occasions as this are useful. This is our memorial day.

Jesus and his friends were off to do the same – in a very different context. We are getting towards the cosmic climax of this story of Jesus as Mark records it. (In fact, this is the fiftieth sermon in this series.) His ministry of teaching and healing and preaching is drawing to a close as the greater destiny that awaits him now looms very large indeed. He has proclaimed the new agenda of the Kingdom of God, inviting men and women to join him, to discover a new way of living and of looking at life. And now he is only hours away from the brutal execution that will ensure that what he has promised will actually come true.

He's in Jerusalem for that, but ostensibly he is there for the Passover festival. It was the duty of all good Jews to go up to Jerusalem at least once to participate in the festivities and to join in the collective thanksgiving for their God-granted freedom. Even those who were unable to get to the city were able to mark the occasion in their own homes with family and friends. Like Remembrance Sunday, this was an occasion which provided a focus for all the people, a shared opportunity to pause and give thanks.

And at the heart of the thanksgiving was a sacrifice. This festival of remembrance went back not a century or so, but many centuries, to the time when God graciously enabled his people to escape from oppression and slavery in Egypt. It was a bloody and brutal occasion, with carnage that would have been the equal of anything experienced in the mud of Picardy or the beaches of Normandy. And the sacrifice

which allowed it to happen was the killing of a lamb, whose protective blood was daubed on the doorposts of the Israelites homes.

And to help them remember that sacrifice there were not poppies, but other symbols – the unyeasted bread which reminded them of the urgency of their evacuation: the bitter herbs which recalled their bitter experiences under the Egyptian yoke: the roast lamb whose crackling, spluttering fat and strong meaty aroma ensured that they remembered their dash for freedom with all their senses. They would sit round the food and sip the wine, reciting the story of their liberation and their prayers of gratitude to God, aware that, although they were currently under the governance of the Romans, they were at least in their own land with the freedom to worship their God as they had done for generations.

That's what Jesus is doing here: marking the occasion with his friends who have travelled down from Galilee with him to Jerusalem. They have been staying in Bethany, just outside the city, we think at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. But Jesus is aware that this is dangerous territory and there are people out to get him. His words and deeds have not found universal acceptance amongst the people, particularly amongst the members of the religious hierarchy who can see their own powerbase being threatened by this wandering preacher and healer from up north. And, as we saw last week, the plot against him is now pretty well complete – betrayal has been arranged and the leaders are just waiting for someone to rid them of this turbulent rabbi.

It's because of that threat that the setting up of the Passover meal seems so clandestine. The friends won't know where it is to be eaten until they get there. Jesus has set it up, but there's an elaborate scheme to let the two disciples who have to set the table and sort out the food know exactly where it is. They are to go into the city and look for a man who is carrying a water jar. It's usually a woman's work, so the man would be easily identifiable in the crowded streets in the same way that today you might have to look for man carrying a Dorothy Perkins bag or wearing a floral plastic rain hood. They are to follow him and ask the owner of the house to which he leads them if they can use his guest room – a common enough request at Passover time, but the disciples are given a password which will identify them: "*The Teacher asks ...*".

And then they're there – all of them. But as they prepare to go through the familiar ritual and hear the familiar words, Jesus begins to subvert it all. He moulds the centuries old occasion of remembrance to fit his own agenda. He knows – and fears – what is going to happen the next day, so he transforms this meal of remembrance and thanksgiving for God's grace to his people Israel into an occasion of remembrance and thanksgiving for God's grace to all people. In fact, he makes it so inclusive that even Judas the betrayer is invited to take part. And the phrases and actions with which he leads them are now used by us twenty centuries later.

It's a sombre occasion, as are all such acts of remembrance, but it has all the hallmarks of a festival of remembrance. It is something in which all can participate, even those who are grateful but aren't entirely sure why. And at the heart of it is a sacrifice, a life laid down in the service of others, the Son of Man and Lamb of God nailed to a cross so that others can enjoy freedom. But, of course, the friends don't know that at the time, and subsequent generations will need a visual focus, a symbol to help them remember. The bread becomes the body of Jesus; the rich, red wine becomes his blood.

And from that day on, as the followers of Jesus, those who take seriously his invitation to join in the life of the Kingdom, sit down around the bread and wine of communion, they remember the sacrifice that Jesus made. It was a sacrifice – like the countless lambs of the first Passover night, like the millions of men and women who died in the wars of the last century – a sacrifice that bought freedom.

We now enjoy the glorious awareness that we are liberated from the consequences of human sin. We are forgiven people who can look forward to an eternity spent with God, an eternity as the people God originally meant us to be before evil perverted and polluted his world. And we are liberated from the

tyranny of having to sin. There is now a choice and we can choose to follow the way of Jesus Christ. As the followers of Jesus there is a shared experience of remembrance each time we eat the bread and drink the wine together. We take time to reflect on what has been done for us by another and we are able to enjoy the true freedom that has been won for us by another in the ultimate act of sacrifice. But that, of course, is a bit further on in Mark's story.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do we need symbols to help us remember things?
2. What does Remembrance Sunday mean to you?
3. Why do you think the Passover is so central to the lives of Jewish people even today?
4. If Jesus had to die in order for God's plan to be accomplished, why do we blame Judas?
5. In what other ways can we remember and celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus (other than communion)?
6. Is communion too familiar a ritual for most Christians really to appreciate it? Why/why not? What can we do if it is?