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Remembrance

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President, and soon you would have church structures, church buildings, possibly even a hierarchy. It didn't come to pass, because sadly it didn't come to anything.

The Quakers seek to avoid official leadership and titles of respect. But no group, not even they, can survive in the world without some leadership, some organization. Our text does not say that there must be no leaders, but that the leaders ('the greatest among you') must be servants.

Second, wherever there is leadership there is power, authority. But power is of two different kinds. There is power that enables others, and power that disables others.

Most of the power we experience in church and state is disabling power. When a politician says that the public should leave politics to the professionals, you know he has something to hide. One job in our society for which no qualifications whatsoever are required is that of Member of Parliament. MPs and MSPs are not professionals. In a democracy, politics is everybody's business.

In a church, faith is everyone's business. Yet through the centuries the churches have evolved structures of authority (with form and trappings borrowed from the secular power) which are themselves disabling. Clergy, of whatever church, are educated, trained and examined before they are ordained. They become, in a way, professionals. The assumption follows: clergy are the people who know; lay people are ignorant. No matter how benign the bishop, how patient the pastor, how modest the minister, their power tends to be disabling. The more powerful the priest, the more powerless the people. The more efficient the bureaucracy, the more dependent the parishes. The priest or minister as authority figure keeps the people as children, forbids their growth. So does the minister as entertainer, which seems to be the ideal of some today. The congregation are treated as children to be kept happy, entertained. Some people like it, alas. But feed people on rubbish and you do not build them up in faith.

Enabling power is disturbing, because it calls people to grow and to learn and to think and to take responsibility. Ian Fraser used to say that the purpose of ministry is to bring out the gifts that are in the people. The need today is for that enabling power which sets people free to rediscover the Gospel for themselves, to be themselves, and to be the church, responding with fresh imagination to the need of the world. It is happening in many places, and where it is, there is an excitement, as if the church itself has discovered what it is to be the servant. It is the enabling power of love.

What of the church dignitaries with their robes and their funny hats, and different adverbs before the word Reverend – Very, Right, Most and some even more remarkable than that? I once thought it would be fun to be The Sublimely Revd, but the Church of Scotland can't rise to that. Perhaps we ought to treat all that with the gentle ridicule which it deserves.

Take our passage too literally and you could be stuck with externals. See it rather, like the Sermon on the Mount, as an ideal of love that stands in judgment over our self-deceit and pride. A prelate in his funny hat may have more of the spirit of love and service and humility than the elder in his neat grey suit. On the other hand, he may not. George MacLeod was once asked how he dealt with all the adulation that a moderator of the General Assembly gets on his travels. 'It's all right,' he replied, 'if you don't inhale.'

The key to it all, the one who keeps the pretentious church from falling apart, is the Servant. So never inhale the flattery. But take a very deep breath and inhale to the full the spirit of love and humility and service, which is the spirit of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

10th November: Remembrance Sunday

REMEMBRANCE

By the Revd M. J. Ward, BSc, BD, PhD
Deerness, Orkney

Matthew 5:38–48; Revelation 22:1–5

'Nobody told me. My God, nobody told me.'

Elizabeth's horror at seeing the inscribed names on the monument to commemorate the lost soldiers of the Somme is, for me, the most shocking image of Sebastian Faulk's haunting novel *Birdsong*. You become immune to the descriptions of the physical injuries and the relentless suffering of the trenches; you accept too the solitary figure of an old man incarcerated in a mental hospital for the last eighty years as the result of shellshock, just as Elizabeth

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could accept that she was his first visitor since 1946. Of such realities, the horror of war and the lifetime of pain and isolation that can follow is the last century made. No, it is not the scale or the inhumanity of the suffering that shames us, as it shamed Elizabeth; it is the simple fact that as the years pass, what is remembered becomes nothing more than a statistic, people reduced to dates or names on a map, so meaningless that the point comes when it seems unimportant whether we know our history or not. The names are forgotten, and with the names their stories, their faith, their fear, replaced by cold heartless numbers. The sheer anonymity of their sacrifice is the scandal that reduced Elizabeth to tears.

The march of history has been the march towards anonymity: a faceless society in which every person has his or her number. This obsession with numbers has its lighter side: time and time again I have to persuade mail-order companies sending goods to Orkney that, no, we don't have house numbers or even streets in Deerness! Computers, it seems, cannot cope with houses with no numbers. But there is a darker side: when governments or organizations treat us as mere numbers: statistical trends. X thousand accidents, x million unemployed, x hundred church members. How easy it becomes on Remembrance Sunday to count the fallen as just so many poppy leaves in the Albert Hall. How often have we wanted to shout out from the rooftop of our unnumbered houses there are real people behind the numbers, you, and me, our families? The French theologian who served as a stretcher bearer in the 1914–18 war, Gabriel Marcel, spoke out against what he called *technolatry*: the dehumanization of flesh and blood to arithmetical symbols, numbers on a computer with no feelings, no past, no heartbeat, no face. Of course, the number crunching oils the wheels of modern society. And in that great number-crunching exercise, the National Lottery, the anonymity that is offered to lucky prizewinners can be a real blessing. But few of us would want to tick the box marked 'no publicity' or 'anonymous' to every second of our lives, every relationship we cherish, every event that punctuates our Christian pilgrimage. We want to be less anonymous in the eyes of the church, in the eyes of the nation, in the eyes of the community. Ultimately, we want people to treat us as people, not numbers. So it is with those we remember today: the fallen of two wars and other conflicts who become numbers to the generations that did not know them. It's hard to shed tears over a statistic. My primary school teacher would become increasingly exasperated when I did not identify the numbers in my textbook answers: '8 – 8 what? 8 oranges? 8 elephants?'

The Gospel gloriously affirms who we are: not elephants or oranges, not numbers, but individuals with families, people we have loved and love still, faces that are etched on the memory. The Gospel never was and never could be about numbers. *Zaccheus*, Jesus said, come down from that tree. *Andrew*, drop your fishing nets and follow me. Names, Christian names, individual names, called out by a God whose love for the individual knows no equal.

Entering Jerusalem, there were those who hoped that this Jesus would just become one of the holiday crowd, fading into a never-ending historical procession of would-be Messiahs. If you silenced the people, the stones would cry out, replied Jesus. Jesus came to put anonymity to the sword; giving love to each individual, as an old minister friend of mine used to say, loving us as though there were only one of us to love. Jesus' last invitation was the personal word to a thief whose agonizing death was not to be lost in anonymity: today you will be with me in Paradise. Not a statistic, not a number but one man who had addressed Jesus and who found himself addressed by him. His enemies had hoped it would all end in an unmarked grave: but resurrection defies anonymity. Christian hope demands publicity: He has risen! So too do the names of loved ones continue to come from our own lips as they must: for the Christian hope is founded not on the unmarked grave of three days by which Jesus sanctified our own death but on the hope of reunion that follows: personal reunion, individual reunion, love that never dies.

1 Corinthians is remembered supremely for that hymn to never-ending love in Chapter 13: 'If I can speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am nothing.' But that is not the great hymn of love. No; there as elsewhere, the resounding affirmation of sacrifice, of love and all that is good and pure and Christian, is to be found in the last chapter in a list of names so obviously dear to Paul. So dear, in fact, he attempts in the little space he has left, to tell their story. Why? Such men: such *men*, not such numbers, not such statistics, but such *men* deserve recognition.

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That is why we are here today: for we follow, humbly and with faltering steps, in that great tradition of sacrifice and love that has marked out the church for 2,000 years. Here there must never be anonymity! Here there must always be faces to the names, stories to tell, stories of sacrifice, of love, of devotion, of faith, so that what has gone on before does not become just another meaningless number.

Such folk deserve recognition. Let us not insult our dead by whispering their names in choked grief or not mentioning them at all. For we know that as the parting is brief, so the reunion when it comes will be as individual and personal as the stories we hold so dear of their life with us. Sebastian Faulk's heroine has one triumphant answer to the shocks of discovering the real past behind the numbers: it is an answer that involves a Christian name and her way of bringing it back from the pages of an old diary. But read the book for yourselves.

Elizabeth knew that her grandfather did not die so that he might become anonymous. He did not die, they did not die, so that society could de-humanize us into blurred figures on a computer screen. The Christian message is simple: we will remember them by name, as Jesus loves them by name. The Christian cannot tick the box marked anonymous. And God willing, the Elizabeths of the next generation will NOT be able to say, 'Nobody told me. My God, nobody told me.'

17th November: Second before Advent

JUDGMENT DAY

By the Very Revd John McIndoe, Glasgow

'No hotter book lies in the Old Testament.' This remark by a great biblical writer (George Adam Smith), may surprise us as applied to the small and obscure book of Zephaniah but he had good grounds for his verdict. Not only did Zephaniah hold nothing back in his denunciation of the sinful city but the language he used to describe the approaching Day of the Lord was unparalleled in its fierceness: 'That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of clouds and thick darkness.' Little wonder perhaps that language of such vivid quality came to be taken over in mediaeval times to portray the Last Judgment itself and as such was incorporated into the Latin Mass for the dead as the *Dies Irae*. A popular version owing something to the tradition of the negro spiritual is still in use:

> O sinner man, where will you run to
> All on that Day?

Uncomfortable as some of the language may be to modern ears, Judgment is an undeniable theme throughout the Bible, not least in the New Testament, as today's readings testify.

But surely the theme of Judgment is something of an embarrassment in contemporary times? Post-modern man is not going to be frightened into faith or morality by the spectre of a Last Judgment. He or she is more likely to share the contentedness of the prophet's fellow-citizens who were enjoying a life of ease and religious indifference. 'The Lord will do nothing, good or bad' (1:12).

Nevertheless, judgment came. It was inherent in the very processes of history and could not be averted. When Harold Macmillan was asked about the factors that make the task of government difficult and replied 'Events, dear boy, events', he was acknowledging the strain of instability which runs through public affairs. A contemporary list of areas to watch might include: institutional shakiness, electoral indifference, media domination, social alienation, resurgent disease, educational frustration, uncontained crime. Such a catalogue is easily compiled but no list of clear and present dangers can include the unexpected. 'When they shall say peace and safety, then sudden calamity shall come upon them . . . and they shall not escape' (1 Thess. 5:3). Every day is potentially Judgment day.

While it may seem to some observers that our problems are such that we shall be buried under the collapsing weight of our own civilization, yet for the most part, it seems, we dwell comfortably settled upon our lees, as Zephaniah would have put it, lethargic like a wine that has sat too long upon its dregs.

Sloth, we are told, is one of the deadly sins not merely for being laziness but because it betrays a reluctance to engage with the terms of life and spurns the grace inherent in life itself. It is a vote of no confidence in the gift of God. This was the condition of servant number three in the parable (today's Gospel, Matt. 25) who having received a talent from

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