

Scripture: Psalm 139: 7-16 / Matthew 5: 38-48

Text: *Jesus said, You have heard that it was said.....but I tell you*

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN**

Keeping it personal – several years ago, along with the then Moderator of the General Assembly, Alan McDonald, I visited the Belgian town of Ypres where we participated in the Act of Remembrance held every evening at the Menin Gate.

The memorial at the Menin Gate bears the names of some 55,000 officers and men from United Kingdom and Commonwealth Forces who fell at battles such as Passchendaele and who have no known grave.

Nearby is Tyne Cot, the largest allied military cemetery, where on a subsequent visit with my wife Margaret and our daughter Lindsey, we spent a little time in the visitor centre.

Recalling that one of her great uncles had been killed during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, Margaret started tapping at the computer console and within seconds we found the details of David Wyllie, the Heugh, North Berwick, 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Black Watch, killed in April 1917 and buried at Duisson near Arras.

Suddenly what had been an historical interest visit to Tyne Cot was transformed into something personal.

Suddenly the seemingly endless sea of white crosses that lay before us looked very different.

Rather than blending into one another, each cross stood out and represented something personal, someone's son or husband or father or brother or friend.

And each cross spoke of loss, most immediately the loss of one man's life but also the loss of the hopes, dreams and plans of those they left behind.

Keeping it personal: if the Great War is often referred to as warfare on an industrial scale, and some of the trench battles at Passchendaele and the Somme as carnage on an industrial scale, there was nothing industrial about the telegram Margaret's great grandparents received telling them of their son's death.

It reads;

*Robert Wyllie, Heugh Farm, North Berwick; regret Pte David Wyllie, 1/7 Black Watch, reported 24 April 1917, died from gunshot wounds in no 41 Casualty Clearing Station, France*

Personal and profoundly intimate, this was bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh and it must have torn at their hearts.

Keeping it personal: one of the gifts the church brings to each and every Service of Remembrance is to keep it personal, a gift based upon the deep conviction that each one of us is known and loved by God.

It is a conviction rooted in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament.

*O Lord you have searched me and you know me.  
You know when I sit and when I rise, you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

As the Psalmist contemplates the intimate nature of God's knowledge and concern, he is drawn to see that, knitted together in his mother's womb, he has been fearfully and wonderfully made.

The poetic imagery is as tender as it is beautiful and it speaks of the Psalmist's profound conviction that living each day in God's watchful care and concern, the Psalmist is held in the eternity of divine providence.

Keeping it personal: isn't this one of the ways in which Jesus' ministry could well be described?

As he went through the towns and villages of Galilee, the wandering teacher, preacher and healer, Jesus was often surrounded by crowds of people amazed at the authority of his teaching, the evident godliness of who he was and the life he lived.

Yet isn't it noticeable how often the gospels record that, above the crush and chatter of the crowd, Jesus demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to hear one voice crying out, to notice one person standing on the edge of things, or to feel one hand reaching out to him for help.

If there is something intensely personal to the gospels' record of Christ's ministry, I hope you hear it as a source of consolation and profound hope.

It is a source of consolation because whether it appears on the walls of the Scottish National War Memorial, or the Menin Gate, or on one of the many war memorials throughout the country, what a comfort to know the person behind each name was known and loved by God.

It is also a source of profound hope because it points to the Christian conviction that each life finds its fulfillment in the eternity of divine providence.

Yet as well as providing consolation and hope, such a conviction brings with it a challenge, or perhaps better, an invitation.

*You have heard that it was said.....*

Living in an occupied country, the people of Jesus' day suffered the domination and abuse of imperial Rome.

The disciples would doubtless have witnessed somebody being bullied, harassed or assaulted by a Roman soldier and they would have known it was a soldier's right to force a local person to carry their equipment for up to one mile.

Now Jesus was telling them to turn the other cheek or walk a second mile.

Difficult and demanding; what Jesus proposed was all of that and more but as the passage unfolds, we discern Jesus calling disciples to transform relationships of domination and abuse into relationships that embody healing and wholeness.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth might limit retribution but it still left people blind, toothless, alienated and angry.

*You have heard that it was said.....but I say to you.*

If Jesus' invitation was to follow him it was always to follow him into new and better ways of living and being.

And so, as Jesus describes different situations of injustice, situations and experiences with which his disciples would be all too familiar, he invites them to imagine new and different ways of responding, ways that open up the possibility of healing, reconciliation and peace.

At its heart, so much of Jesus' teaching is concerned with making room for others, especially strangers and enemies, just as God makes room for us in the fulness of God's kingdom.

Or to put that in other words, Christ's invitation is to discern what it looks like in your life and mine to turn the other cheek, walk the second mile, love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us, that is, to commit ourselves to the different way of life Christ calls us to live and the different kind of people Christ calls us to be.

Keeping it personal; whatever else it is, a Service of Remembrance is personal, deeply personal for the family of David Wyllie, deeply personal for the families of those women and men whose names surround us ..... but as you listen to the words of Jesus calling you to a new way of living, I hope you recognize just how deeply personal it is for you too.

Let us pray;

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve Thee as Thou deservest  
to give and not to count the cost  
to fight and not to heed the wounds  
to toil and not to ask for rest  
to labour and not to seek any reward  
save that of knowing that we do Thy will. Amen*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer attributed to St Ignatius of Loyola