

Remembrance Day, with its slogan “Lest we forget” calls us to remember those who served or gave up their lives in recent or long ago wars. The word ‘remember’ comes from a Latin word re + memorari, translated as “to be mindful of a thing”. But it has another connotation – that to “re-member” is to put back together again. When we bring to mind loved ones who have gone before us, we re-member their image, perhaps from a significant moment in our lives together or, very likely, from a photograph. Photographs are especially precious, because as time passes, memory fades, and we have the sorrowful and guilt-inducing realization that we have forgotten exactly what our loved ones looked like. Without photographs, we can no longer re-member them. It must have been devastating in the days before photography for people to be unable to remember their loved ones – they could not put them back together again (or recreate them) in their mind’s eye. I cannot imagine the sorrow of early pioneers to Canada, when time had erased the memories of the families and friends they had left behind. So remembrance means both ‘becoming mindful’ of those no longer with us, and also ‘putting our loved one back together again’ through an image we recreate in our mind’s eye.

This second meaning of the word ‘remember’ informs my understanding of the Eucharist, when we use Jesus’ words, “Do this to remember me” in the prayer of consecration of the bread and wine. For some people, ‘This is my Body’ brings to mind (remembering) Jesus saying these words to his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem. To Roman Catholics, it signifies the miraculous reconstitution of (re-membering) Christ’s actual body in the bread or wafer. Likewise, for me, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist has much greater significance than, ‘This is just something made of flour and water.’

Returning to the theme of remembrance, in the context of those who have departed this life ahead of us, family members and friends, the writer of the Book of Wisdom tells us that the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God. God has not forgotten them, and nor should we. It is like the “Lest we forget” of Remembrance Day. The writer says that in the eyes of the unwise, death seemed to have been the end, a disaster. But no. At the end of this age, they will be like embers of a fire, bursting into flame, and will “run like sparks through the stubble” – an image both of rekindling the embers, and the speed at which the fire travels when the stubble is burned after the grain harvest. I don’t know if it is still allowed, but I remember flying to England with Michelle one September, and seeing the countryside blanketed in smoke from the fires of the stubble being burned.

Col. John McCrae’s famous poem, “In Flanders Fields”, echoes the theme of the Book of Wisdom. Short days ago, his friends “loved and were loved, but now [they] lie in Flanders’ field.” Yet they have not been forgotten. The wild poppies of northern Europe are about the same size as the poppies we are wearing today, but are a little more orange than the ones sold by the Legion. The crosses in the muddy fields of John McCrae’s poem have been replaced by headstones in beautifully manicured military cemeteries. Yet even there, wild poppies sneak in to remind us that even amid the remembrance of death, life cannot be denied, a core belief of our Christian faith.

Last week, Jan quoted John O’Donahue to the effect that it is meaningless to think of the location of souls (or heaven) as a place in the conventional sense. It is not ‘somewhere up in the sky’ or anywhere

else as we earth-bound creatures know it. Souls must exist in a dimension (if I could call it that) outside of conventional space and time. This was in my mind this week when I read articles in the *Globe & Mail* about the new Governor General's dismissive remarks on religious belief. She seemed to lump religious believers together with climate change deniers and subscribers to quack medical therapies. She said, sarcastically, "can you believe ... we are still debating and still questioning whether life was a divine intervention or whether it was coming out of a natural process let alone, oh my goodness, a random process." She made these remarks in defence of scientific enquiry, but with the supposition that nothing can possibly be outside rational explanation. Although I am a trained scientist, I side with O'Donahue. It is impossible to posit the location of souls in the language of science as we presently understand it. But that is not to deny that each of us has a spark of the divine within us, nor to wonder whether or believe that this divine spark, which we call a soul, can exist independently of our mortal bodies.

The nature or location of heaven is not a new problem. Members of St. Paul's congregation in Thessalonika were convinced that Jesus would return very soon to inaugurate God's Kingdom. They feared that believers who had died already had missed the boat. Paul tried to comfort them by writing that their dead friends would rise first, then those presently living. But unlike O'Donahue, Paul was imagined Heaven to be a physical place, somewhere "up in the clouds" [2 Thessalonians 4:17].

Heaven's presumed location is also relevant to today's Gospel story. As with many of the parables reported by Matthew, Jesus begins by saying what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like. His story is based on the tradition that in Biblical times a bridegroom and his family came to the bride's home at an unexpected hour to begin the marriage feast. The bride and her bridesmaids waited to greet them with lighted lamps. I read somewhere that this tradition continues today in some Palestinian villages. In Jesus' story, some of the bridesmaids forgot to fill their lamps with oil; when the bridegroom's arrival was announced, their lamps had gone out and they couldn't join the welcoming party. By the time that they had scrounged around for more oil, the party was under way and they were locked out.

We can never be sure how Jesus meant (or perhaps how Matthew thought Jesus meant) us to interpret his parables. The usual explanation of the parable is that Christ is the Bridegroom, the bridesmaids are Christian believers waiting for the Second Coming (making the similar point as Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians). For Martin Luther, the oil in the bridesmaids' lamps represented faith or piety – some believers have enough, others do not. The marriage feast is the life of the age to come. The parable illustrates the 1st century Jewish concept that the end of the age was at hand, so everyone must be ready for a final Judgement Day. If you want to have a valid entrance ticket to the Kingdom of Heaven, you had better be ready by preparing yourself ahead of time!

This explanation focusses on being always having your bags packed ready for the afterlife, with our deeds in this life preparing us for the non-physical, non-spatial world of souls. But running through the Gospels is a second strain of thought, of which I have spoken many times, in which Jesus said that the Kingdom of God/Heaven had drawn near. Now the parable presumes a different inference – that we must constantly be ready to remake the world as we believe that God would have it be – a society of justice, fairness, and love, where there is enough for everyone, and no-one is left out. In this model, Christ, the Bridegroom, has arrived; are we, the bridesmaids, ready? "Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning; give me oil in my lamp, I pray" – to have the enthusiasm to do Christ's work in this world?