

Remembrance Day 2016

The Battle of the Somme raged for 141 days. More than a million men were killed or wounded, making it one of the bloodiest battles in history. And this year marks the centenary of what has been seen as the beginning of modern all-arms warfare.

As a German working as a priest in the Church of England, 'Remembrance Day' always arrives with rather mixed feelings. On the eleventh of the eleventh, most of the world, and particularly the Commonwealth, remembers and gives thanks for the fallen soldiers of the various wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But I sometimes feel that Germany just didn't get the memo. Whilst the rest of the world pauses for two minutes, in an unfortunate coincidence of the darkest irony, the 11th of November marks in Germany the beginning of *Karnival*, a historic period of frivolity when people dress up and parade in the streets. For Germans to remember their fallen dead of the First and Second World Wars is a fraught topic indeed.

The Bible speaks about a God who promises to "blot out our sins and think of the former things no more." So should we as Christians simply move on and forget the dark past, looking towards a brighter future? Far from it! The Swiss German theologian Karl Barth, who played a vital role in supporting the Confessing Church in Germany in its strong stand against the Nazi regime, reminds us that as the Church (and in fact as humanity) we live "*Zwischen den Zeiten*", between the times – between the Crucifixion of Christ and his return in glory.

And so although the Church has the mandate and responsibility to tell the world the Good News about God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, I find myself constantly drawn back to remember the horrors of my country's past. Yes, of course I believe that God's mercy goes so far even to forgive the terror that Germany unleashed not only on God's chosen people but also on the rest of Europe and the world, but this does not mean that we can simply move on and put the past aside.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called that sort of attitude “cheap grace”. “Cheap grace,” he said, “is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”

No, God’s forgiveness for and means of dealing with humanity’s evil acts was costly; it cost God his Son. But this also doesn’t mean that there is no hope for a better future. There is! There is hope! And this hope is found in the suffering God on the wooden cross who has overcome evil!

What the Bonhoeffer quote demonstrates is that these two truths – the first, that we must not rely on “cheap grace” and expect forgiveness without repentance, and the second, that we *have* a hope and future – are intimately linked. Because to step into this future hope, we must remember and pay proper respect to the horrors of our own past.

And it is in this that I think I have found a path – however piecemeal, however inadequate – through the fraught questions of how my country should best remember the fallen, repent for its past, and look to a future. It is also only in light of this truth that I am able to pick my way through an evermore-terrifying present, where the children of Aleppo are still dying, where desperate refugees are demonized for looking too old, where hatred seems more often than not to trump love.

In this broken world, looking for a brighter future can only come when we – British or German, American, African, or Asian – intentionally choose to meditate on the words written behind the altar of the old Coventry Cathedral: ‘Father Forgive’!