

## REMEMBER, REMEMBER...

November seems to be a time for remembering. For nearly 1200 years it has begun with the celebration of All Saints' Day. And for the last 90 we have observed first Armistice Day, more recently Remembrance Sunday. And in between, "the fifth of November" – and plenty of other less well-known ones

## SELECTIVE MEMORY

The problem is, we have a selective memory! We need one, to survive (I read the other day about someone with the proverbial elephant's memory - having almost total recall was a nightmare), but, consciously or unconsciously, we select what we remember, we simplify, we leave out things that show us in a bad light.

Take Guy Fawkes' Night for example: of course there's a genuine story of "gunpowder, treason and plot" – but when we light our bonfires do we also remember the history of anti-Roman Catholic feeling in many parts of the country which was already there and long outlasted any serious political threat? It embarrasses us now (our friends at St Hubert's celebrate their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary on November 3, and it goes without saying that all the local churches are invited to the Mass), but it's not long gone.

## MIXED MEMORY

Over in Germany there's an important anniversary on November 9. It's the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "Fall of the Wall," the climax of the peaceful revolution in East Germany – many "Ossis" think the "no violence" Leipzig protest a month earlier was more significant, but the Western media weren't there! I've never heard of anyone "over there" regretting it (apart from former Communist party bosses trying to regain some credibility), but there's are mixed memories around: I've had older Christians tell me they regret some of the changes since, in particular increased unemployment and growing self-centredness ("we were poor then, but we looked out for one another" sums it up – does that ring any bells here?).

In reality all the events we choose to commemorate are a mixture of good and bad. We know that, for example, when it comes to Remembrance Sunday: honouring those who died, and supporting those who survive, comes first – but with it in the Remembrance service always comes penitence for the wrongs of war (no ex-

serviceman I have ever talked to has pretended that war is "goodies v baddies" morally), and recommitment to a just peace.

## REMEMBERING RIGHTLY

And a mixture of good and bad is exactly what we should expect as Christians, because of the first November festival – All Saints. Strictly speaking All Saints' Day is only for saints with no "Day" of their own, but usually we make it a general celebration. But who do we celebrate? The New Testament answer has to be "all of God's people are saints," called by God and dedicated to him: long past – recently departed – and present; famous worldwide – well remembered locally - or people who are special just to us.

But that doesn't mean we are "all saints" in the sense of being perfect – or even above-par – as disciples of Jesus. One thing you can be absolutely certain about a saint is that he or she is a sinner – someone who has an instinctive bias *against* what God wants. And that remains, however long we struggle against it.

Another thing that's absolutely certain: they, and we, are saints because of what God has done for us, and what he does in us, and not of who we are in ourselves. That's as true of you and me as it is of Therese of Lisieux or Mother Theresa or Martin Luther or Harwood's Three of Bartholomew, Lawrence and John.

As Isaac Watts put it in one of my favourite All Saints' hymns:

"Give me the wings of faith to rise  
within the veil and see the saints above ....  
they wrestled hard, as we do now,  
with sins and doubts and fears.

We ask them whence their victory came:  
they, with united breath,  
ascribe their conquest to the lamb,  
their triumph to his death."

So when we discover that our favourite "official" Saint had failings (or that some of the best stories about them are legends) – or when we remember a much-loved local Christian – we don't have to gloss over their failings, because "warts and all" they are God's saints. All Saints – all sinners – all saved – and all remembered.

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