

## Remembrance Sunday 2013 St Marylebone 10.50 am

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

In the introduction to her book *Wounded: From Battlefield to Blighty*<sup>i</sup>, Emily Mayhew writes this:

*Much of what we ... know about the wounded of the First World War comes from the writers of fiction. Bestselling books such as Birdsong and Regeneration tell beautiful and moving stories of casualties, nurses and doctors, and the extraordinary play War Horse is set in a medical aid post where Joey and Topthorn pull ambulances. These works are based on detailed historical research but they are not – nor are they intended to be – history.”<sup>iii</sup>*

In her book, Mayhew takes the real words of the real men and women, the soldiers and stretcher bearers, doctors and surgeons, nurses and chaplains, orderlies and hospital train staff and volunteers in France and Britain, to tell their story in their words.

Indeed, as Mayhew points out, the only way of telling the story is through personal testimony, through diaries and sound archives, because, in the 1920s, within a few

short years of the Armistice, all the policy documents from the War Office, the implementation reports from the Army Medical Services, Treasury financial records, RAMC staffing reports, hospital archives and casualty statistics, would all be destroyed because no-one could think of a reason to keep such a mass of official documents.

It is through the careful sharing and telling of stories, however, that society is shaped and formed, and memory kept alive, and it is memory that helps us to shape and make sense of the present and which, in turn, dictates the shape and content of the future.

Without memory, a child will go on being burned by the flames of a struck match, and without memory a people will continue to repeat the mistakes made by their forebears in the past.

Stories help us to rehearse the memory of what has been, and, for generations, it was perhaps the story tellers and bards of a society who were valued most highly above their peers.

Their oral story telling in word and in song shared news, interpreted disaster, recorded victory and, not

infrequently, engendered the daring exploration of new worlds.

But once a story stops being told and retold, it loses its currency and its potency and the society which once was shaped, maybe even held together by its foundational myths, can all too quickly begin to fragment or perhaps even disintegrate altogether.

Kate Hankey<sup>iii</sup>, a member of the so-called Clapham Sect which did so much in the nineteenth century to ensure the emancipation of slaves and the reform of the prison system, asked through the words of her once well-known hymn to be told *the old, old story*, over and over again; to be told it *simply, slowly, often* and *softly* but perhaps most importantly to be told it *always*.

The story to which she referred in her poem and in the two hymns which issued from it, was, of course, the story of Jesus, the story which, for her, was the story by which and through which every story finds its true voice and ultimate meaning.

Today, many once-familiar stories have lost their meaning, and once-familiar, long-rehearsed foundational myths have fallen silent. Even the old, old

story of Jesus has become unfashionable and risks being left untold.

Ask a child about Christmas and you are likely to be told about reindeer and corpulent men squeezing down chimneys; ask an adult about Easter and you are likely to be told about rabbits and chocolate. Ask anyone, of any age, about death or the meaning or purpose of life and any conversation will, most likely, dry up altogether.

Passchendaele, Arnhem, Incheon, Goose Green, let alone Inkerman, Ladysmith, Rorke's Drift and Suakin, were key words in once-told and retold stories but to most people today, they are words which mean absolutely nothing.

In a recent survey, a majority of the people asked to place the world's great religions in an historic time line not only thought that Christianity came later in history than Islam, but that Hinduism dated from the 1960s!

For a number of years English Heritage, has been engaged with the University of York in funding an interactive DVD-based project which helps fine-art, art history and architecture undergraduate and post graduate students interpret paintings and buildings because so many of them know so little of the classical

or biblical myths and stories which have shaped so much western art and architecture.

We are the product of the stories we tell, indeed, we are characters, integral parts, of the stories we tell, but once we have stopped telling stories, not only do the boundary stones and the wayside markers of who we are, become all-too-quickly overgrown and obscured, but we ourselves are infinitely diminished.

Perhaps with the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War looming, we will once again be unashamed to tell and to listen to the stories of who we are and how we have come to be; to hear with fresh ears the stories of soldiers and statesmen, of widows and orphans, and perhaps, just perhaps, our fading collective memory will be reawakened so that our journeying into this twenty first century will not be disfigured by the shell holes and the nuclear conflagrations of the last.

As Christians, we are used to hearing stories, stories of patriarchs and judges, of prophets and kings; stories of God's searching love and of the Church's missionary endeavour to share the good news of God's Kingdom seen in Jesus: stories which not only tell us who we are and where we have come from, but stories which invite us into a future walking in the footsteps of the one who

became as we are we so that we might become as he is, changed from glory to glory, forgiven, reconciled, transformed; renewed in God's image and likeness.

It is only when we have the courage to tell our stories, however dark or shameful, and to set them alongside the story of God's loving interaction with fallen creation that we can come to know most truly and most fully who we are and where it is we are headed.

So with Kate Hankey, may we never tire of hearing and telling the old, old story; the story of Jesus and his love for the world, and may we find his story to be not only a comfort in time of trouble but the story that saves us from ourselves and makes us whole.<sup>iv</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Wounded, From Battlefield to Blighty, 1914-1918*, Emily Mayhew, The Bodley Head, London, 2013

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* pp 1ff

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bhankey.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Tell me the old, old story  
Of unseen things above,—  
Of JESUS and His glory,  
Of JESUS and His love.

Tell me the story simply,  
As to a little child;  
For I am weak and weary,  
And helpless and defiled.

Tell me the story slowly,  
That I may *take it in*,—  
That wonderful redemption,  
God's REMEDY for sin!

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Tell me the story often,  
For I forget so soon!  
The "early dew" of morning  
Has passed away at noon!

Tell me the story softly,  
With earnest tones and grave;  
Remember, I'm the sinner  
Whom Jesus came to save.

Tell me the story always,  
If you would really be,  
In any time of trouble,  
A comforter to me.

Tell me the same old story  
When you have cause to fear  
That this world's empty glory  
Is costing me too dear.

Yes, and when *that* world's glory  
Shall dawn upon my soul,  
Tell me the old, old story,  
"CHRIST JESUS MAKES THEE WHOLE.