

John 15:5-17

What are we buried in?

"1917

June 7th - In a trench adjacent to the Messines Ridge

It was still all dark when at 3.10am the earth shook with the explosion of nineteen great mines and all our guns opened up a terrific fire... We waited for the German reply. It was not long in coming. There was a terrific roar as a huge shell came roaring through the wood and buried itself ... within 30x (clicks) of our abode, a momentary pause, and a terrific explosion which put out our lights and almost buried us in debris. We had scarce time to relight our candles when over came another of the same quality, this time a little nearer. We said our prayers, for had the [Germans] continued to traverse left the next one would have blotted us out. We waited for some time hugging the ground, but strange to say no more came our way and at last we ventured out..."

So wrote my great-uncle Bert, of the advance enabled by gigantic land-mines tunnelled under the Messines Ridge in 1917. He would huddle again near this Lone Tree Crater at Spanbroekmolen in April 1918, advancing via the shelter of a farmhouse, only to retreat again, in the fruitless stalemate and sometimes ragged retreat that marked WWI.

In June this year, I stood near the same spot. Now known as the Pool of Peace, the mine crater is now an idyllic lake covered in lilies and surrounded by trees full of birdsong. For miles on each side the adjacent fields are a peaceful scene of ripening harvests, the only noise not shells, but the brisk wind ruffling the corn and the willows. Hidden behind the nearby farmhouse, a Cemetery where the dead of the 14th Battalion Royal Irish Rifles lay, as many killed by the debris of the mine as by the returning German shell fire, as they gained this long-sought-after position.

More than 41,000 kilos of explosive were used to blow the crater at Spanbroekmolen, laid in a tunnel that ran more than 500 metres from Allied positions, going to 26 metres under ground. At the time, it was the largest man-made explosion in history. Given the place was of strategic significance for the Germans, and yet there is no German cemetery nearby, we can only assume that their soldiers were obliterated by the blast.

The human race has got quite good at burying things. We don't just bury high explosives and land-mines, we bury the bases of stone and wooden memorials to make them stable, and we've even buried the tips of little wooden crosses in our churchyard this morning; a small act in the face of such a great cost. We bury other things too, like the foundations to our homes, the seeds or roots of plants we grow in our gardens, and quite frequently, the scars of our own wartime service, if that has been our lot, and our frustration that world leaders perpetuate the "brutality, futility and stupidity of war", as Dwight D Eisenhower said.

Today our emotions may be raw, brought to the surface on the annual tide of red poppies; but they are better out than in, and we shouldn't be embarrassed by showing our emotions. Being British though, 'stiff upper lip' and all that, we may equally have buried our feelings. They may include frustration at the loss of life marked each Remembrance Day, our grief at the cost to particular generations or the death of members of our family, our concern for those still serving in our Armed Forces and their families, our judgement (positive or negative) of those who were conscientious objectors, our struggle to relate to or help those with PTSD or mobility issues, because of the action they have seen, or our pride at the successes that some of those same people bring to sporting events we watch.

That's a lot of feelings. A lot of emotions. Some of them perhaps buried so deep, that one day, if we're not careful, they will explode in our lives. But if those emotions grow inside us too much as a community, or paradoxically are completely forgotten or ignored, they may even one day blow up in the life of our nation

and its international relationships. That's one reason why Remembrance Day is so important. What happens to those emotions, depends on what we bury them in.

Our Gospel reading this morning talks a lot about grapevines and pruning. It talks a lot about who Jesus is and the sacrifice he is about to make for his friends. In World War I it was a passage used, and abused, to convince young men to volunteer, to go to the Front and make what was known as the "ultimate sacrifice"; it even inspired the prayers for victory of Christians on both 'sides' of the conflict.

But our Gospel reading this morning is also, and above all else, about the command to love. That could sound trite, shallow, almost meaningless in the face of countless conflicts, and continued loss of life. But it is love that should be the ground that our emotions are buried in, whether that be in shallow soil or a deep mine shaft. And yes, that love is to be like Christ's, in that it should be sacrificial, but if we take a moment or two's consideration, we'll realise that his example of loving sacrifice was not simply in his death by crucifixion; that was the last resort, meant to be the 'perfect sacrifice' the world would need.

Jesus' frustration at the proposed and expected loss of life when a woman was caught in adultery, was to put the whole situation on pause by writing in the sand, and then ask "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone." (John 7:8) That is love, love that stopped loss of life. Love that should be remembered.

Jesus' sorrow at the prospect of the grief and loneliness which his mother would suffer, led him to create from the cross a new family to care for her by placing her into the care of the beloved disciple (John 19:25-27). That is love, love that showed compassion in the face of grief. Love that should be remembered.

Jesus healed the centurion's servant. Despite the fact that the centurion represented the face of the army of occupation and oppression, he understood what it was to have authority, whose authority it was that Jesus had, and that by that authority a valued servant could be healed (Luke 7:1-10). That is love, love that brings healing in the face of oppression. Love that should be remembered.

Jesus, heralded by angels as the Prince of Peace, sent out the twelve disciples not simply with the power to heal but with authority over evil, using the words "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew 10:34). That is love, love that knows the conflicting demands of peace. Love that should be remembered.

Jesus' healings to those blind since birth, those with leprosy or the lame, come with that element of new life that brings new purpose, as they return to contribute to family life, go to worship and give thanks to God, or witness in their communities to God's power. That is love, love that brings renewed life not just to those who need healing, but to their families and to the world. Love that should be remembered.

Our emotional response to each Remembrance Day should be buried deep, not in a way that is hidden or dangerous, but buried deep in love, the love of God. We are called by Jesus' example to re-member, to put back together that which has become broken, maimed, grief-stricken and dismayed, and that means remembering that love can be more powerful than war, if it is buried in the love God has for us. Our emotions therefore demand actions, actions that aren't just a single day, a lone cross, a poppy, but actions that are a living, year-round response to Christ's many examples of what it means to love – and we mustn't let our good intentions get buried too. That is why so many serving in our armed forces today, are dispatched around the world to disaster zones to use their skills for humanitarian aid. Our part is to remember that there are plenty of disasters happening on our doorstep, in our nation, which is why we all have a duty to respond to God's voice of command, his only command: "love one another, as I have loved you."

