

SIR CHRISTOPHER COVILLE

TRBL-REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY-NOV14

This is a very special year of Remembrance. It is, of course, the Centenary of the outbreak of war in 1914. But it is also the year that operations ceased in Afghanistan; a conflict in which 453 men and women of our Armed Forces lost their lives; many more were wounded, either physically or mentally, having witnessed unspeakable horrors against their colleagues and the civilian community. We salute their sacrifice, and the outstanding work of all servicemen who gave the people of that troubled nation a taste of democracy and freedom, and the hope of a better life ahead. As always, our soldiers, sailors and airmen have renewed our sense of national pride; they are at the heart and soul of what it means to be British.

It is sad that, with this admiration in mind, we have to acknowledge that the 20th Century was probably one of the worst in human history, with nearly 100 million lives wasted in carnage, terrorism and natural disasters. The 21st has hardly got off to a better start, with fundamentalism, distortion of religious values, obsessive nationalism and extremism replacing the old threats of the past. How do we move forward into a better world, one in which all people can flourish in peace; or is this just naïve hope in the face of historical experience, all of which suggests that mankind is doomed to live in permanent conflict, both with each other and with the natural world? Are there any common themes running through the past hundred years on which we might build a better future?

I would like to suggest three.

Firstly, I submit that in the last century and the beginning of this one, there has been an astonishing degree of self-righteousness, a belief in particular values irrespective of those of others. In short, whether it was the obscure perceptions that caused the Great War, the seemingly contrived reasons for the second Gulf War, or the sense that we in the West have a right to impose regime changes on other nations, there has been a consistent theme of arrogance, bordering on self-delusion, in international politics. Of course, this was so in earlier days, but has science, philosophy and religion taught us nothing in the meantime? I will return to arrogance later, but I put it at the top of my list of reasons for strife and conflict.

Secondly, we have to come to terms with the mistakes and injustices of the past before any move towards the ultimate goal of reconciliation. This, of course, calls not only for a sense of the historical context, but also for great humility. To my mind, Nelson Mandela understood this far better than any other statesman of my generation. This great man never sought revenge, but he did expect his oppressors to confront the realities of history and the evil of apartheid. In portraying Mandela as a saintly figure who forgave his abusers and asked nothing in return, we ignore the real message of his relationship with the white South Africans who abused him: that you can't expect reconciliation if you refuse to accept responsibility for the past. In [Maya Angelou's poem](#) at President Clinton's first inaugural ceremony, she said, "History, despite its wrenching pain / Cannot be unlived, and if faced / With courage need not be lived again." That's Mandela's message to us all; but I question to what extent the intervention operations of

this century have included an appraisal of the historical and cultural context? Using Angelou's words, 'Have we faced history with courage?'

Thirdly, we must as human beings move on to a higher level of understanding of each other's values. We hear people say: 'We must develop a more tolerant society.' But I wonder how you would feel if your neighbour dropped by and said: 'I thought I would just let you know that I tolerate you.' I suspect you would feel a little upset, and with good reason! OK, so perhaps tolerance is a start, but it is not the solution. We have to move way beyond that towards understanding, accepting and embracing others points of view, way of life and deeply held beliefs. Perhaps then we could develop societies in which integration rather than segregation defined our relationships with each other. In this respect, I suggest that the concept of a multicultural society is a flawed one, because it leads to separate communities, even ghettos, and opens the way for the young of minority groups to be radicalised and corrupted by extremism. Only by bringing communities together can we hope to live in harmony. This does not mean loss of cultural identity, which enriches nations. Rather it calls for the observance of one law and one national identity, under the umbrella of a common language.

Putting all this together, I suppose that what we need more than anything else is wisdom. There is a lot of cleverness around, but wisdom is much more than that: it rejects arrogance, revenge and single-mindedness, and embraces acceptance, understanding, reconciliation and forgiveness; all traits we associate with Christian values, but which we see too seldom on the world stage.

In his wonderful TV series, 'The Ascent of Man,' Jacob Bronowski concluded the last episode at Auschwitz, where so many of his

family had been murdered. In a most moving scene, he waded into a pond outside the camp and in a voice full of emotion uttered words which I judge to be the essence of wisdom; this is what he said:

“It is argued that science will dehumanize people and turn them into numbers. That's false, tragically false. Look for yourself. This is the concentration camp and crematorium at Auschwitz. This is where people were turned into numbers. Into this pond were flushed the ashes of some four million people. And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance, it was done by dogma, it was done by ignorance. When people believe that they have absolute knowledge, this is how they behave. This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of gods.

I owe it as a human being, to the many members of my family who died here, to stand here as a survivor and a witness. We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to *touch* people.”

As today we honour those who fell in war, do we not as the human race have a consequent duty to see that they did not die in vain; to reach out, respect, understand and accept others, and in so doing recognise that if we wish to live in peace with our fellow man, we have to acknowledge that there is never just one right way.

In the words of St Peter: *Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For “Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it.*

