

Remember, Remember... (October 2017)

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By Rev Paul Graham

Well, it's that time of year again; the time when the hours of darkness are greater than the hours of daylight and summer days become memories. We're in autumn, a time of falling leaves and misty mornings. It's not the greatest of seasons for me, I'll be honest, as it reminds me that the end of another year is just around the corner and all those jobs that I meant to do in the garden will have to wait a few more months...

However, autumn has its own charms. As a family we have a birthday and a wedding anniversary to celebrate during the lifespan of this magazine and many of us will look forward to those occasional bright sunny days that show that summer hasn't quite let us go yet. We might enjoy a misty walk in the woods, collecting conkers and colds in equal measure. The flu jab becomes a hot topic of conversations and hospitals start to gear up for "winter pressures" that seem to start earlier each year.

We cannot escape the cloak of autumn that surrounds us. There is the kaleidoscope of colour to be seen in the world around us, as trees shed their loads of leaf and fruit. There is a crispness to the air on a cold morning and cobwebs are etched in dew for us to spot just as we walk into them. We wrap up warm against the chill when we go out and sit at home in gratitude to Stephen Gold and Franz Sans Galli, the inventors of the radiator.

Our thoughts are inexorably drawn to the coming winter and Christmas, with early preparations starting, or even continuing for some hyper-organised people. People start to accept that it's approaching and surrender to its various charms and stresses with joy and resignation. Churches start to anticipate the possibility that some might make their annual pilgrimage to sing a carol or two and make arrangements accordingly. Primary Schools start to dust off nativity play costumes and teachers spend staff meetings avoiding each others' eyes in the hope of not being the one to conduct the rehearsals. Restaurants and pubs hope that their Christmas Party bookings are nearly full and start thinking about next year. Shops start playing Slade, Wizzard and Cliff, sending shoppers into a frenzy of buying as much as they can as quickly as they can before the playlist reaches the X Factor winners.

All of this encapsulates these months we call autumn. And that's not all...

In November we have the double-whammy of Bonfire Night and Remembrance Sunday, two events that have flavoured our history and continue to shape our future. Without the failure of Guido Fawkes et al, who knows what our government structure might look like now? Without the success of our armed forces in both World Wars, who knows what the world would look like now?

Speculation is handy, but hardly useful with these events; we're at too great a distance in time to be able to plot a rational course through an alternative history of a successful Gunpowder Plot and there are too many "what ifs" in creating alternative outcomes for World War One or Two. However, what we do is commemorate and remember, whether with bonfires and fireworks or silence and respect.

Commemorate and remember; it's important to reflect, to look back briefly in a time when we're constantly looking forward. In an age that it seems that we're constantly told that we have to move forward just to stand still, we take a few moments during November to stop, to watch, to wait, to think not about tomorrow, but about yesterday. We might go to a firework display, we might join in with Clare's Remembrance Service, we might want to stand and remember on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month.

Now, this is where I might get a bit controversial. It's important to remember the sacrifice of others in the wars, but I suggest it's more important to remember this: what we commemorate isn't as black and white as the old footage might show. Yes, there were heroes fighting on "our" side, sacrificing themselves in the name of freedom; there were also those who laid down their lives for their neighbours on "their" side. There were brave men who went into battle courageously; there were also murderers, thieves and bullies who accompanied them to escape detection and justice. War makes colleagues of those who would pass by on the other side of the street; the "greater good" unites those who would otherwise be at each other's throats, just as it divides families, friendships and nations.

In the midst of the confusion of morality, justification, duty, loyalty, friendship, courage, cowardice, survival and suffering we might ask where God is. But it is exactly in that midst that we find God. It's said that there are no atheists in a foxhole and this may be true; but what we also reassure ourselves that the One who promised never to leave us nor forsake us was also there in the trench, sea, desert, jungle and battleground.

In Jesus, we see one who walked in the midst of the mess of first century Palestinian life. In Jesus, we see one who wasn't put off by the confusion, the questioning, the suffering and the pain of those around him. In fact, it was quite the opposite. The Jesus we encounter in the Gospels didn't just walk in the midst of all that his culture and time could throw at him; he met it with love, grace and truth. And when it came to suffering, he walked the path of a common criminal, derided, abandoned by all but one who deserved to hang on a neighbouring cross.

So, as we remember on November the 5th and the 11th those events that have shaped history since they took place, let's also remember the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Let's face it, the impact of Jesus' life shapes not just history, but the future all the way into eternity.