

25th Annual Remembrance Ceremony: for those who lose their lives to illicit drugs Weston Park, Yarralumla; Monday, 26th October 2020

Reflection by Rev Simon Hansford

I am struck by the concept of remembering, which is the central reason we are here.

Someone we love has died because of drug dependence, and we are here to remember them, to say their name again.

In my job, there are celebrations, like yesterday when a ninety-seven-year-old colleague was acknowledged for his history of service in the church and for his country. I attend Anzac Day ceremonies, where remembering is both about honouring those who serve, and about our grief.

I lead funerals, where grief and loss are integral as people try to make sense of what is happening in their lives.

Remembering can sound passive, as if that is all we can do. As if it is nothing.

But remembering is vital. We have read their names, but we are already offering more.

We recall the lives we have shared with someone who has died; we talk about their face, and their voice and when we held their hands. We remember the parties, and the wonderful things we did, and the stupid things we did. And when we tell the stories, we laugh and weep together, and our hearts and lives become slightly stronger.

Remembering and grief sit together, as we are now.

But remembering is more.

There's a hymn, written in the last twenty-five years, about the horrific cost of war, and those left behind. The last line invites us to "remember forward to a world restored"; remembering is an act of courage and hope and change.

We remember today all those we have named, those we love. And in our remembering we assert the value of those we have loved and those we know around us who are struggling with drug use and a system which is not serving them – or us – well on this.

Our presence here today, our remembering, asserts the inherent value of those who have died. We refuse to see them as collateral in some politically, or culturally-styled "war on drugs", but as members of our families, our friends, as people wrestling with addiction and often other significant issues in their lives.

There is also anger, as we recall what might have happened if things had been different, if we had had better resources for treatment, a more hopeful focus on those things which sought to bring people back to life, to community and family.

We are here, once again, to name this as a health and social issue, and not a criminal one. We are here to declare, once again, that the huge amount of money and other resources poured into criminalising and punishing drug users could be better invested in treatment and health care. We know, from medical experts, from legal and judicial experts, and from experienced police, that justice, hope and economic common sense make this a compelling argument.

This is the reason the Uniting Church, our justice arm, Uniting, and so many other legal, medical and community groups support Fair Treatment.

Our remembering affirms the courage and work of so many family and friends, people like Marion McConnell and Bill Bush, and all those who advocate for change, to drive law reform on drug use, so that we address the deeper causes, not just the symptoms, and look at treatment and restoration as opposed to punishment.

As we know, there are debates happening right now on drug use, and drug decriminalisation, and even legalisation of some drugs. This is an important and difficult and necessary conversation, and we are engaged, as we need to be. The conversation will move when the facts are established, but will move more powerfully when our experiences are.

The stories we carry are valuable and need to be heard, if we are able to tell them. It is by the telling of our stories that statistics become people, that news items become human beings, that arms' length becomes hand in hand.

This week in the life of the church ends with All Saints Day, which is where Hallowe'en found its beginning. Saints are those not those astringent, "nice" people, who never cause trouble. They are people who are passionate, prophetic and engaged, with dirt under their fingernails, who are often found badgering those in power for change, or hope, or justice.

My ministry is established in the hope of a God who always remembers us; whose first and last act is to love and bring life; who, in the worst moments of our lives, is with us.

As we remember those we love who have died, we remember those
who have helped us find our way,
who have helped us speak the name of those we have lost,
who have helped us learn to sing and stamp our feet,
who have continued to cry out for justice,
who have helped us to remember.

- *Simon Hansford, 26th October 2020*