

Learning from History

Does the past matter? Rather than looking back should we not focus on the present and look forward to the future? I imagine that if you asked a cross-section of people those questions you would get quite a range of responses.

Certainly there are those who do tend to look back to the past, often as some sort of golden age, whether it really was or not. There are others who perhaps have had bad experiences in the past that they desperately want to forget and put out of their minds. And of course it is important to live in the present, to face up to both the joys and the challenges of life now.

Yet the present is so often conditioned by the past. More generally we would be unwise to ignore what history can teach us – not only what was good in the past but also the mistakes that were made. An understanding of history can help us to avoid the same mistakes again. Though it has to be admitted that in the course of history lessons are not always learned and the same errors and failings do tend to recur.

This time of year in the Church's calendar does rather focus on the past. We have celebrated All Saints' Day, when we give thanks for the example of holy men and women in past centuries. We have remembered our departed loved ones on All Souls' Day. And in just over a week we will be commemorating those who gave their lives in war as we keep Remembrance Day.

And yet the focus of those days is not solely, or even primarily, on the past. All Saints' Day reminds us of holy men and women in our world today. Indeed as Christians we are all called to be holy ones, to be saints. On All Souls' Day we are reminded that we are united with our departed loved ones now. And on Remembrance Day we remember those who give their lives for the establishment and maintenance of peace now. It is not just about the First and Second World Wars but about the many ongoing conflicts in our world today – conflicts that are very much on our mind as we pray for peace and reconciliation.

Our faith too is based on the past, on history. It is focussed above all on our Lord Jesus Christ, the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith" as we heard in our reading just now (Hebrews 12.1-2). And yet we believe that Jesus is alive in our world today, that God is ever present, that his Holy Spirit continues to be active in the world and in the lives of men and women today. We read in the Bible about what God has done in the past. That helps us to see God's activity in our world today, and to give us hope for the future. For all that we give thanks to God.

*4 November 2016
Kingsley Boulton*