

Even I only have vague memories of the French singer Maurice Chevalier but the following song he sang with Hermione Gingold is still played on the radio from time to time.

H: We met at nine
M: We met at eight
H: I was on time
M: No, you were late
H: Ah, yes, I remember it well
We dined with friends
M: We dined alone
H: A tenor sang
M: A baritone
H: Ah, yes, I remember it well
That dazzling April moon!
M: There was none that night
And the month was June
H: That's right. That's right.
M: It warms my heart to know that you
remember still the way you do
H: Ah, yes, I remember it well

Our memories are precious - but they are not always reliable.

They are precious in the context of family life – memories passed down from one generation to another. They tell us something of our background, our history – they actually help us understand who we are, the people, the circumstances that moulded us. That is part of the reason that people research their ancestry and also explains the popularity of programmes like ‘Who do they think they are?’ In this celebrities are given the chance to delve into their past – some find they have ancestors who were of the nobility, some were criminal, some were abandoned by their families or subjected to grave injustices – some like Jeremy Paxman became quite emotional at some points in their search.

Memory – helping us understand who we are.

Communities have memories. This community has its own memories. We look back to the time this Church was built in 1866. It is here we gather for worship Sunday by Sunday. To this place we bring our children for baptism, our dead for burial; here we come with those we love to be united in marriage. The tablets and plaques on the wall remind us of former Parishioners, some who died in war, some made a distinguished contribution to the life of our city and nation. There is a list at the back of former clergy and near the door up to the choir there are memorials to former organists. Each in their own way have contributed to the life of this place, have helped make us the community we are today. That is to forget a far more fundamental memory which binds us to Christians of different traditions and different ages. There is the lectern from which the Scriptures are read Sunday by Sunday, this unique body of literature reflecting on God's dealings with humanity expressed in poetry, in history, in drama and wisdom, through which and in which God continues to speak afresh to us in our own day. The table around which we gather at his command, to share bread and wine in memory of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we read the Scriptures, as we share the bread and wine we are drawn into a deeper understanding of who we are, as members of the Body of Christ, separated not by creed nor culture, race nor class.

Of course nations have memories – we call that history. On this island we are currently in the midst of a decade of centenaries, events North and South that have left their mark on our collective history. Whether we like it or not these event have moulded political life and community relationships North and South that have left us in our present state.

Over this weekend, there are ceremonies to recall the events surrounding the landing of the Asgard and the landing of weaponry. There has been a recognition by Governments North and South and in Britain that the events that occurred between 1912 (the signing of the Ulster Covenant) and 1922 which marked the Anglo Irish Treaty and the beginning of the Civil War should be remembered by all communities, not in a spirit of uncritical glorification but in a spirit of seeking to understand, not only the actions of our own community but of all.

The events we remember this weekend did not happen in isolation. They occurred in the context of the passing into law of the Irish Home Rule Act, the signing of the Ulster Covenant pledging armed opposition to the introduction of Home Rule, the promulgation of the *Ne Temere* decree, the landing of arms in Larne by the UVF. None of these events can be understood in isolation from the others. If we are to learn from our past, we need to understand our past. The Spanish philosopher George Santayana observed: ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’.

In this regard, one of the most memorable events in Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Dublin was her speech at the State Dinner in Dublin Castle and her observation: ‘With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things we would wish had been done differently, or not at all.’ So we remember, as we remember we honour the ideals and the sacrifices of those who shaped this nation’s history. But we do not do so uncritically for even in the midst of the ideals there were fallible men and women with their own blind spots, their own limited vision.

The Churches need to look back to the period of those events we are remembering and reflect. I will always recall a meeting of the Ballymena clerical held just as the peace process was getting under way. We had invited a number of the political leaders to talk to us. On this particular day we were meeting with the leader of the Alliance Party, Dr John Alderdyce. He had been brought up in a Presbyterian Manse in Ballymena. We had asked him how he saw the role of the Churches over the next few years. ‘Too often in the past,’ he said, ‘the Churches had acted as chaplains to the tribe instead of the prophet willing to say the unpopular ‘Thus saith the Lord’.’

So as we remember we would do worse than ponder on the words of Queen Elizabeth: ‘With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things we would wish had been done differently, or not at all.’ and resolve to do our part in learning from the past and building a better future for all sections of our society.