

Names that God remembers

Remembrance Sunday

Ruth 2:1-23; Psalm 46

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One sunny October afternoon, a few years ago, we had driven our son with all his suitcases and books to the college where he would be spending the next three years in study. There were students and parents everywhere, finding their way around the ancient buildings, excited, laughing, getting ready to say goodbye as the young people started along the next path in their life, away from home.

I took a few minutes to go into the chapel, an impressive and beautiful building dating from the 1550s, the walls seeped in the prayer and praise of thousands of students, over almost five centuries.

The antechapel is impressive, with family crests and life-sized statues of the college greats - Sir Isaac Newton, Alfred Lord Tennyson. But behind them, engraved on wooden panels and marble slabs, were over 1000 names of young men from that college who had died in the two world wars.

I read through the alphabet of names: Adamson, Albright, Allen, Andrews... and I thought of the group outside, full of life, starting out, as those young men once had, before being sent far from home to kill and be killed.

My son entered the chapel and stood in a beam of light from the stained-glass window, and for a moment he seemed to stand for all of them.

Many among us have known loss, or carry its echo in family stories that still carry pain.

And the question rises up, why, God?

Why do young people die before their time?

Why is cruelty allowed to crush compassion?

Why do the innocent fall while the powerful remain unscathed?

We might ask, as Naomi once did, *'Has the Lord turned against us?'*

Whatever the human explanations for war, no reasoning can comfort someone who has lost a child, a spouse, a friend. The question of *why* lingers in the silence between names, unanswered, and yet not unheard.

Our reading from Ruth takes us into another world marked by loss. Naomi returns home empty. Ruth follows her, clinging not to certainty but to love - the deep, faithful kindness we heard about last week, the *hesed* that holds fast even when everything else falls away.

In the fields of Bethlehem, she gathers the scraps left for the poor, a foreigner in a strange land. And there, quietly, grace begins to take shape. Boaz notices her, speaks kindly, and ensures her safety.

Nothing in the story explains the ‘why’ of Ruth’s earlier suffering, but it shows us something else: that God does not stay distant from pain. God’s mercy is not thunderous or grand, it moves gently, through the kindness of one human being to another.

So, when we cry out to God, ‘Why, this isn’t fair’, we know that our God understands. Our God has been there.

God was there in Flanders fields,
on the beach at Dunkirk,
in the Troubles in Northern Ireland,
at San Carlos Water in the Falklands,
in Basra in Iraq,
at the Fall of Kabul,
under the rubble in Gaza,
and in Israel, and in the Donbas.
Our God was, and is there, crying out with us.

When we stand before the names on a wall, we too stand before a mystery we cannot solve. But Ruth’s story shows that even in a world scarred by cruelty, compassion endures.

And into the silence, the psalmist speaks, in the psalm that we sang in paraphrase today,
Psalm 46:

‘God is our refuge and strength,
a help close at hand in times of trouble.
Be still, and know that I am God.’

Not still because the world is calm,
but still because even in its turmoil,
God remains our refuge and our strength.
The Lord is with us, in every place of loss,
in every act of kindness,
in every cry for peace.

We remember people whose names are written in stone, and those whose names are known only to God. We remember not to glorify war, but to honour the courage that love inspires, even amid ruin.

We understand peace not only as the absence of conflict, but as a practice, a way of restoring dignity, healing, and justice, even if quietly.

Amidst our angst today, remembering those people who died so others might live, we hold on to this promise: our hope lies in God who absorbed the world’s cruelty and transformed it within himself, repaying evil with good, blame with forgiveness, death with life.

*May our God who suffers with each of us
bring each one of us peace,
and hope, today.
Amen.*