



St Marylebone
Parish Church

The HCA service of Remembrance 2019

In a remarkable series of poems, commissioned by Radio 4¹, the poet Michael Symmons Roberts writes very movingly about remembering and forgetting:

*Keep . . . the pictures of last Sunday in the park
when summer leaves were turning,
roller-bladers hand-in-hand,
our boys throwing fists of cut grass at each other.
Think of the extravagance of green,
and think especially of the sky, its blinding, cloudlessness.*

Throughout our lives we are constantly remembering - and forgetting; it is the process through which we learn to interpret the world and, through which, we come to be who we are.

When someone dear and precious to us dies all sorts of memories and remembrances, come to mind: a first kiss, a happy holiday, a birthday; shared joys - and even shared sorrows made bearable by having shared with someone whom we have loved.

¹ Michael Symmons Roberts, Last Words V in The Half Healed, Cape Poetry, 2008

Following the death of a loved one, we can lose all sense of who we are, where we are – even what day of the week it is - memories come all jumbled together and it can be impossible to untangle even our most precious memories or make any real sense of them.

The process of sifting and sorting, as perhaps with clothes and other personal belongings, comes with the passage of time; passing days or months or years can help us to hold firmly and securely on to some things, whilst discovering that we are able to let go of others.

Thankfully, our minds - over time – also allow us to discard many unhappy or equivocal memories, while enabling us to hold securely onto other, happier memories; our minds are kind to us and we discover, sometimes unexpectedly, that it is these latter good memories which are the ones that stay freshest and brightest in our mind's eye.

But there are times, no matter who we are nor how much time has passed, when something, probably something quite insignificant, will trigger, as if from nowhere, a memory which we thought had been safely filed away deep in our subconscious, and it catches us by surprise – especially when the person with whom we want to share that memory is no longer by our side.

Anyone who has had the privilege of loving another human being, or of being loved by another human being, will know how just how complex and complicated dealing with memories can be.

For some people, the necessary task of sifting and sorting is helped by living within a supportive framework of a religious faith: an inherited and well-tested narrative that helps us to make sense of who we are and the relationships we have enjoyed.

Others find the help and wise counsel of a trained therapist might help to make some sense of particularly difficult or troubling memories, and there are many who find the greatest help and the securest comfort in the simple, quiet, wordless companionship of a friend.

But whoever we are - and however we deal with our memories - we all have to do *something* with them.

Many of you might know Canon Henry Scott Holland's poem, *All is Well*², which comes from a sermon he preached at St Paul's Cathedral in 1910, while the body of King Edward VII lay in State at Westminster Abbey.

In his sermon, Canon Holland attempted to give voice to his strong belief (for him religious belief) that the act and art of dealing and coping with memories is best done not by preserving them, storing them away very carefully, as if in acid free paper - untouchable and unreachable - but by living with our memories as a natural and precious part of our everyday lives:

² Canon Henry Scott-Holland, 1847-1918, Canon of St Paul's Cathedral from 'The King of Terrors', a sermon on death delivered in St Paul's Cathedral on Whitsunday 1910, while the body of King Edward VII was lying in state at Westminster, published in *Facts of the Faith*, 1919

Continuing to call a departed loved one by ‘oft used, old familiar name[s]’;
carrying on speaking about those whom we still love, but see no more, with comfortable ease: without difference of tone or ‘forced solemnity’;
continuing to laugh at once-shared jokes;
playing, smiling, thinking and praying ‘without shadow or effort’.

The memories of a life shared and treasured do not stop being precious, do not stop meaning all that they have always meant just because someone dies. *They* still are what they have always been to us.

Our precious memories, however old or however recent, must be allowed to come and go naturally, like the incoming and the outgoing tide; to fade and to soften perhaps with the passing of time, or to remain vivid, burnished and polished by remembering.

No-one here tonight has been untouched by the loss of someone dear to them; no-one is without precious memories.

May those precious memories, *the pictures of that last Sunday in the park when summer leaves were turning, roller-bladers hand-in-hand, sons [or daughters] throwing fists of cut grass at each other, the extravagance of green, and the sky, in its blinding, cloudlessness* and those with whom we shared them continue to shape us and make us, and always give us reason to be thankful.