St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 9th November 2025, i.e. Remembrance Sunday.

Job 19:23-27a
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-end
Luke 20:27-38

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As those of you who are regular here will know, I love words. If you catch me in a playful mood, you might see me pause in conversation as I work out how to make a pun from something you've just said. As well as making puns, part of loving words, for me, is noticing how there are words we only use some of the time. It always amuses me, for example, how even urban churches will use the word "garner" several times on a single Sunday in the autumn, and then let the word slip down the back of the linguistic sofa for another year.

Anyway, I've noticed that a similar thing happens around Remembrance. This time the word I'm thinking of is the word "cenotaph". I guess that any municipal war memorial qualifies as a cenotaph – it's what we call the memorial at the bottom of South Street here in Dorchester – and we capitalise the word when talk about the national war memorial in Whitehall. But I don't hear people using it most of the year; the word "cenotaph" has an appropriate gravitas for Remembrance-tide, but "war memorial" seems to do the job the rest of the time.

"Cenotaph" is the combination of two Greek words; it means "empty tomb". Naturally, there will always be people whose lives and whose sacrifices we wish to honour, whose bodies couldn't be recovered for conventional burial. Perhaps it's the fact that we can't perform the usual offices of love for these people that makes cenotaphs places of pilgrimage. It's the closest modern people get to the devotion that took place at shrines in medieval Europe: they're like shrines without relics. We use cenotaphs to make sure we have done our duty, as others have done theirs. So we will probably always be using them, especially for the honoured dead of our armed services.

All of our readings today are concerned with the same challenge. How do we respond well to the reality of death, of sacrifice and bereavement?

Job's story is a byword in our culture for undeserved suffering. Over thirty-six chapters of the book that bears his name Job argues and searches – with his friends, but also with God – trying to get to the bottom of why he has suffered so greatly. He becomes convinced that he will die as a result of

that suffering. At the heart of the argument, and without any obvious reason, Job suddenly declares his belief that he will be vindicated. One of the things that makes a difference to him is the hope that someone will make him a memorial, something made of words and stone and metal. He cries out,

> O that my words were written down!
> O that they were inscribed in a book!
> O that with an iron pen and with lead
> they were engraved on a rock for ever! [Job 19:23-24]

Job probably wasn't imagining a building made of Portland stone, but it isn't far off the rationale for the memorials we make: a lasting reference to the righteousness of a person's cause.

That brings us to our second reading. The Apostle Paul wrote letters to the fledgling Churches spread across the eastern Mediterranean. Judging by his letters, it seems as though the Church in Thessalonika was most concerned about death, and the end times. In the bit we read this morning Paul is addressing some of their anxieties about the end of the age, and the signs that will herald that end time. Above all, he wants to reassure them that whatever happens they will be ok: Paul believes this, he says,

> because God chose [them] as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. [2 Thessalonians 2:13]

Job seems to place his hope for vindication in a physical memorial crafted from words and stone and metal. But Paul says in another place that his confidence comes from letters written “not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” [2 Corinthians 3:3]. The process he calls “sanctification” is organic – it is the Holy Spirit making something new happen in human lives. And the human lives that result from that process are their own memorial: those lives are their own testimony. As he says in another place: “We will not all die, but we will all be changed.” [1 Corinthians 15:51]

And that is also the thrust of our Gospel reading, from Luke chapter twenty. This passage reminds us, in case we needed reminding, that Jesus is a Jew, and the debates that framed his theology were Jewish debates. It might seem strange that the Gospel set for Remembrance Sunday has all this stuff in it about marriage. But in many cultures institutions like marriage are a means of securing

posterity: you end up with laws like the law of levirate marriage, which is what the Sadducees are talking about here. In other words, this is an argument about the culturally appropriate response to death. In Jesus' culture if you want to be a good Jewish man, and you want to do your duty towards your dead brother, you might build him a tomb...and then marry his wife. That's what a good memorial looks like.

Jesus is arguing that if resurrection is true, it changes everything. In a world ruled by the fear of death we have to make sure the right man ends up with this poor long-suffering woman. When the Sadducees tell him this parable, Jesus responds by saying that, in the resurrection, these seven men and this woman will be “like angels” [Luke 20:36]: in other words, they won't need to worry about what belongs to whom, or who belongs to whom – resurrection life is free from that sort of anxiety. It is a different world.

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I began by talking about cenotaphs, empty tombs which help us do our duty. I think that it is right for us to build memorials for our loved ones, and for our honoured dead. Grief will always play out in culturally appropriate ways, and to deny that would be a refusal of love. So we have a duty to treat these practices, and the emotions around them, with great tenderness.

It was in love that Joseph of Arimathea offered his own tomb to Jesus' friends and family, on that first Good Friday – an act for which he is still remembered by name. He offered it believing that he was doing his duty, and perhaps more than his duty. Nevertheless, very soon afterwards that tomb was empty.

Christians who are taking part in acts of remembrance today bring to those actions the same reverance for self-giving love as our secular compatriots. But we bring an additional hope. The fruit of God's creative love in human lives drives people to show courage in place of fear, and to protect the weak even at the cost of one's own life. These are signs of sanctification, signs that God is calling people to follow the pattern of Jesus Christ. And this process does not end in the construction of memorials, in words and stone and metal. The hope is that one day, in God's time, all tombs will be cenotaphs.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.