

Today I would like to take us on a trip to Coronation Avenue. No, not the television programme that's Coronation Street and where we're going is several hundred miles further south in inner London. Coronation Avenue, Stoke Newington, N16 was not, as one unfamiliar with the eccentricities of English street naming would have imagined, an elegant tree-lined boulevard: it was a tenement terrace of fifteen shops with five storeys of flats above. Under the shops was the air raid shelter for the entire street. It was uncomfortable, cold and crowded, but when the air-raid sirens shrieked, that was where the residents huddled, hoping to keep safe. On the night of the 13th October 1940 that crowded shelter, jam packed with people, received a direct hit. A handful of people survived. About 160 died. About 160: when a bomb hits a huddle of humans it's not always possible to be exact about how many perished.

The story of Coronation Avenue is not a particularly unusual or remarkable one for wartime London, or indeed, any city in war, from the day aerial bombing was invented to this day. I only know the name of Coronation Avenue and the tragedy it bore because I lived some twenty years in Stoke Newington. For inner London, N16 got off pretty lightly in the Blitz: wander round the area now and it's still mostly late Victorian terraces peppered here and there with some 60s concrete confections. It can come as a bit of a shock to realise those brutalist buildings are filling gaps the Luftwaffe made. Still treeless, Coronation Avenue still stands and gives no sense of its tragic history: any visible signs of the visit of violence from the skies seventy-seven years ago has long gone: the constant renewing upheaval of London life quickly grows skin over its wounds and scars are quickly obliterated.

Memory of that terrible night still lingers however in the Victorian gothic fantasy of Abney Park Cemetery. A little courage is needed to visit it: the locals occasionally use the neglected graveyard either as a trysting place or a money-free way of acquiring a new smartphone but for the bored, the brave or perhaps just foolhardy, gently mouldering with the crumbling angels, broken columns and sleeping lions

securely bound in chains of ivy is Stoke Newington's municipal memorial to those whose lives were lost in the Blitz.

The leader of Britain's wartime allies, the Soviet Union, Stalin notoriously once remarked: "If one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that's only statistics." It's an utterly terrifying glimpse into the mind of that tyrant, and even more chilling because the insight it contains about human psychology is without a doubt true.

One hundred and sixty people killed in a bomb shelter is just another statistic until you stand in front of that memorial and those numbers get names. Jacob and Minnie Adler, James and Matilda Alleway; through the Edelsteins and Hoods;, Krakoskys and Marks, Serkovitch and Smith, ending with three members of the Wilson family. The pitiful litany has a tearful coda: most aching of all, after the roll call of names are noted nine persons unidentified. Not just lives lost: their names as well.

Our act of remembrance has at its heart the reading of part of Laurence Binyon's poem '*For the Fallen*'. The verse we hear each year ends with the phrase 'We will remember them', after which there is silence, because there is nothing more we can say.

'We will remember them'. What we will remember is not victory. What we will remember is not our nation's greatest hour; it is not heroism, courage or sacrifice; what we will remember is loss; lives lost and hope extinguished

Not every life lost in war was willingly sacrificed; perhaps very few were, but they were sacrificed nonetheless. There is no selfless heroism in the sad story of Coronation Avenue, yet those lives lost are part of the story of war.

Although we can find many astonishing examples in the accounts we remember of war, today is not the time we focus on heroism, courage or sacrifice; nor is today the time we call to mind national victories, virtues or values. Today we join with that first generation that started marking the end of the First World War each year with Remembrance Sunday. What *they* were determined to never to forget, what *they* were determined to keep in remembrance, was the sheer, obscene, scandalous, senseless loss of life.

Each of those who crowded round war memorials, town squares and villages churches were remembering the people who one day were sleeping next to them, eating dinner with them, the people who were one day planning for the future or reading the newspaper; one day were putting the cat out, running for the bus, yet again getting on their partner's nerves; one day were just part of life's human furniture; one days as every day, day in day out part of the unremarkable repetition of life. One day they were here. And then the next day, they were not.

They were not there any more. For the big things. For their baby's christening, their daughter's first day at school, their son's engagement; for the new Queen's coronation, for the world fit for heroes when it was finally built, to see a man walking on the moon. Not their for the small things: polishing their shoes, running a bath, turning out the lights last thing at night. Not there, any more

If you are living with the person long enough it does sometimes slip your mind. If you're with the person long enough after a while you start to notice their irritating sides and it slips your mind that the reason they are irritating you is because they are there. You get so used to their being there irritating you, you forget that at some point in the past, their being there was what you wanted more than anything else in the whole world. And right now it is what you want more than anything else in the whole world, because they are not there, and they will never be again. 'You'll miss me when I've gone.' And, yes, we do.

Loss is a universal part of the human condition: all of us, no matter how fortunate or comfortable our lives, live lives where we will lose. We loathe loss: our most basic psychological processes push us always to avoid loss: we would forgo rather the chance of winning rather than risk loss. Remembrance started almost a hundred years ago, in response to the end of the First World War. And there is no winning in war, only degrees of losing. Remembrance started to become a tradition because so many people around the world in such a short time had suddenly experienced the hardest loss of all: lives lost, hope extinguished. Remembrance is that generation's heartfelt response to their unbearable loss. It is unbearable, and it must be carried.

The same generation that introduced Remembrance to the national calendar built memorials all over this country to the war dead. It is no coincidence that so often those carved lists of the lost were surmounted by a Cross.

The Cross is the universal symbol of the Christian faith. The Cross is also a definitive symbol of sacrifice: greater love has no man than he lays down his life for his friends. And the Cross is the ultimate symbol of loss.

On that Cross a life was taken. In violence, a son, a brother, a friend was lost.

Right at the heart of our faith is the aching wound of loss.

On the wall of every church, wherever Christians meet throughout the world, there you will find the Cross, the sign of loss.

The Cross speaks powerfully across the millennia of loss.

But it speaks most surely of all of hope.

At Calvary life was lost. But hope was not extinguished: hope was kindled. Hope that no matter how low humanity stoops, no matter how great the crimes we commit, no matter what atrocities we inflict on each other and ourselves, we can be redeemed. Hope that when we have smashed everything to pieces in our mad pursuit of a delusion, we can build a better future from the rubble. Hope that the wounds of war can be healed, lessons can be learned and enmities long-nursed forgotten. Hope that no-one who died at Coronation Avenue died unnoticed, because their names are always known by God. Hope that no-one dies alone on a battlefield, in a bed or an air raid shelter, because each of us from our first breath to our last is held tight in the arms of Jesus. And most of all, hope that when a life on this earth ends, short or long, suddenly or prepared; when life ends, when we have lost everything, we will wake from the dark night of death into the dawn of the eternal day.