



The most treasured virtues, carved in stone: Faith, Hope, Love

Sunday 23 February 2025
Colonel Richard Charrington

Nehemiah 2: 1–6, 11–18 II Corinthians 3: 1–11

As we came in this evening some of you might have given a nod to Isaac Newton as you passed his statue in the ante-chapel. I suspect that less of you will have done more than glance at the wall behind him which lists and serves as a war memorial for the 384 Trinity men who died in the Second World War.

The Latin inscription on the wall is taken from the book of Samuel and reads 'They were a wall unto us both by day and night'. The phrase refers to King David's men who protected the shepherds from harm while they were tending their sheep.

Amongst the names on that wall is that of Piers Edgcumbe who died on 27th May 1940 during the retreat to Dunkirk – and with whose history I have become acquainted over the last few years. Edgcumbe studied engineering at Trinity between 1936 and 1938 where he seems not to have broken into a sweat, his first tutorial report recording that '*his work is entirely adequate although he does not do more than necessary*' while the following year he was described as '*drifting contentedly but in no danger of foundering*'. Still later his tutor predicted under-achievement '*he has done ample work to ensure passing comfortably, could get a first if he tried, but I doubt if he will*', try he obviously did, for Edgcumbe was awarded one.

Despite an apparently assured future, a little over a year after going down Edgcumbe joined the 12th Lancers and in 1940 was detached to a specialist reconnaissance unit – named Phantom - which reported directly to General Headquarters. A mix of 'interesting' characters – a more academic take on Rogue Heroes – he was described by his commanding officer as '*Charming and dreamy. The Continent and USAs idea of an English aristocrat; benevolent and forgetful*'

Edgcumbe's war was tragically short. Within 17 days of the Nazi invasion of Belgium and France he and his driver had been killed when his armoured car was hit. No precise record of the circumstances of his death were available and it was believed his body had been consumed in the fire that destroyed his vehicle. His family were informed and, for the rest of the war and much later, that was that. There was no grave that was known about and the wall here, and the Cothele estate in Cornwall which his family gifted to the National Trust in his name, served as his memorial.

Sixty years later, a stroke of luck, the dedication of his extended family and of local French historians, eventually led to the rededication of a grave that had previously been

marked as that of an 'Unknown British Officer'. In a service attended by family and many others, including representatives of the College, 2Lt Piers Edgcumbe was finally recognized.

Nearly twenty years before this service of rededication I was privileged enough to witness a larger gathering charged with equal emotion but again focused on a wall. At the time I was based in Germany in a camp called Bergen-Hohne. The clue lies in the name for the camp's previous occupants had included the guards for Bergen-Belsen concentration camp – the location of which was about a mile away. On liberation in late April 1945 the survivors were relocated to the permanent buildings of the guards' accommodation while their wooden huts were burnt to eradicate the typhus epidemic that would kill so many.

I had first visited Belsen in the early 1980s and many times subsequently. Despite regular improvements to the visitor facilities the site remains a haunting wasteland with incongruously neat mounds where mass graves were dug and marked with the number of bodies in them – 2500 here, 4000 there and so on.

There are a few representative memorials (including that to Anne Frank) but the prime focus is a long, stone wall bearing inscriptions in the many different tongues of those who died. Erected in 1952 on the orders of the British military government, the wall remains the central point of commemoration in the bleakness of the site, and it fulfilled just that function on the 60th anniversary of the liberation. At a service attended by world leaders alongside survivors and their families I had the privilege of looking after some including the so-called Bride of Belsen, Gena Turgl, who had married one of her liberators in a wedding dress made of parachute silk.

More recently I was involved with a project to erect a memorial to all members of the Royal Armoured Corps who had been killed in the service of their country since 1945. It is another wall inscribed with names and stands outside the Tank Museum in Bovington in Dorset. It was dedicated in a service attended by relatives from historic conflicts as well as more recent events in Ireland, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

There is something about walls and other physical objects that extends beyond mere functionality and gives them meaning. This evening's first reading came from the story of Nehemiah who felt such a strong motivation to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem that he left his comfortable position in Babylon to carry out this task – even at considerable personal difficulty. The value he put on Jerusalem's walls is reflected by the veneration that is still felt towards them.

Other walls are equally full of meaning though the values they represent are less noble. Throughout history walls have been used to divide people, and rarely done with mutual consent on both sides of them. Hadrian had his wall, while Offa went for a dyke, and the Emperors of China constructed something truly spectacular. More recently walls and barriers have been erected in Berlin, Korea, Belfast, Cyprus, Palestine and of course, coming to a border near you, the United States and Mexico.

Despite their seeming permanence, this evening's second reading challenges our veneration of the physical or at least asks us to look to what lies beneath. St Paul reminds the Corinthians that their faith is not based in scriptures even when written in books or carved in stone. For these only point to the rock that is Christ - a living person who is both fully God and human. St Paul demands that we look beyond the tangible object to the meaning that lies within.

My experience, and the emotions displayed by those at the wall-related events I have described, reinforce St Paul's argument. It is impossible to gauge what any individual feels as they build or reflect on these objects, but they should serve to make us reflect on what we value, whether in a negative sense – as symbols of division and intolerance - or more positively as symbols of the things we cherish.

At the services I have witnessed the walls and stones have served as channels for remembrance, pride and sorrow but also for faith, hope, love and much more besides. Whether with relatives at Edgcumbe's grave, with survivors at Belsen or with the raw grief of the recently bereaved at Bovington, the stones challenge us to consider what we value and echo the line from the gnostic gospel of St Thomas '*Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.*'