



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Remembrance Sunday 2020

In his magisterial and panoramic novel *Stalingrad*¹, Vasily Grossman, narrates one of the greatest battles fought in any war, at any time.

The battle for Stalingrad, fought between August 1942 and February 1943 was one of the bloodiest battles in human history with an estimated 2 million casualties.

The eventual Soviet victory reverberated around the world and, in many ways, the battle determined how the rest of the war would play out.

Germany's defeat shattered its reputation for invincibility and dealt a devastating blow to civilian and military morale; Stalin was feted and made Marshall of the Soviet Union; *The Daily Telegraph* went so far as to proclaim that the victory had 'saved European civilisation'.

Amongst the many themes taken up and woven together by Grossman in his novel, one focuses on the nature of 'Truth'.

Using a real conversation the author had had with Maxim Gorky about the nature of truth, Grossman writes powerfully

about 'competing truths': the truth of the reality forced on us by the past and the truth of the future lived in such a way that it might defeat the past.

How does the 'truth' we chose to believe and live by affect not just the future but the present in which we have to live?

Grossman knows that there is only one 'truth', however much we or others would like there to be multiple truths; if we start playing with, or living as if there were, multiple truths, as his character Sofya, argues, 'we're in trouble'; if one chases after two truths, neither will be caught and it will be the end of us.

There is no option but to acknowledge the ruthless and brutal truth of past wars and conflicts, however unpalatable or unacceptable, if we want to live in peace now and to shape a positive future.

All over the United Kingdom today, at War Memorials in parks and gardens and on roundabouts (as here in St Marylebone), as well as in the war cemeteries which litter the former theatres of conflict, people will gather to confront the truth: the truth of war and of all conflicts and acts of terrorism since 1945 - the truth of the dead and the injured of the Great War and the Second World War; the truth of Suez and Aden, the Falklands, and Iraq and Afghanistan; the truth of 911, Bataclan, Manchester Area and Westminster Bridge; the truth spelled out in the inscribed names of the dead, the battles fought and the victories won.

The truth, however unpalatable, helps us to make sense of the past and to shape the future, in so far as that lies in our hands, and it helps us to make sense of the present.

Jesus of Nazareth, who had proclaimed himself as the ‘Truth’ⁱⁱ, stood before Pilate and Pilate asked him, ‘*What is truth?*’ⁱⁱⁱ

The answer comes, not as Jesus stands silently before his interrogator, not even on Good Friday, that day of ultimate dereliction and death and, seemingly total, defeat, but on Easter Day in the birth of a new Creation; a new Creation in which death, and sin, and darkness and decay are defeated once and for all by Christ the New Adam, the Firstborn of the Dead.

Today, we live in a world which chooses to close its ears and shut its eyes to much of what is true; to the unpalatable truths of the past; at best choosing to forget them, and at worst, to rewrite them or erase them from the record; a world which more and more tries to reshape the past within new and alien narratives which can never be true to the stories and the experiences of those who lived and died in and through events played out in real time, in place and space.

Pilate’s question, found its answer in the triumphant One who conquered death, and sin and decay and darkness – all that fights and struggles to separate us from each other and from God.

‘What is truth?’

How does the past, inform our present and shape our future?

We who gather around this holy table, along with those who gather and stand at the cenotaphs and war memorials of our land today on this rather strange and dislocated Remembrance Sunday, might just, with God's help, begin to discover an answer to the question.

‘What is truth?’



ⁱ Stalingrad, Grossman, V., Vintage, London, 2019

ⁱⁱ John 14.6

ⁱⁱⁱ John 18.38