



Saints – Old and New Simone Weil

8 November 2015, Remembrance Sunday

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Jonah 3: 1–5, 10 Mark 1: 14–20

Sacrifice. Not a word we use so much these days. Except on days like today. We tend to reserve it for occasions like this: Remembrance Sunday. We use it to refer to something special, exceptional: 'the *ultimate* sacrifice', the laying down of one's life for a higher cause.

Not so long ago the word was more commonplace. Twenty five years ago I began my work as a sociologist interviewing people about their lives and beliefs, it was quite common to hear older people conclude a reflection on some hardship in their lives with a phrase like: 'we were put on this earth to suffer' or, in the case of Catholics, 'I offered it up'. Behind this way of talking lay an implicit view of life as a sacrificial economy. Suffering was not just inescapable, it was part of God's plan, an offering to Him. There was something virtuous about it. Through suffering one might even accrue merit in the next life, if not for oneself then for the souls of others. My suffering 'made up' the suffering of Christ, the sacrificial lamb. This is what God demanded, a God even more demanding than life itself. Christian liturgy retains such usage. Tonight in this service we will use the word sacrifice three times, and will, for example, speak of what we do as a 'sacrifice of thanks and praise'.

All of which brings me to Simone Weil, the person I selected to talk about this evening, in order to continue the term's theme of 'Saints Old and New'.

As many of you will know, Weil was a French teacher, writer, activist, philosopher-theologian, and devout Christian who died prematurely in a hospital in Kent in 1943, during the Second World War. She was aged just 34. Some say she died of anorexia, but that is too simple, too reductively medicalised. Weil died of tuberculosis exacerbated by malnutrition and overwork, and she did so by choice. She refused to eat more than was available to her countrymen and women in German-occupied France. The coroner's report says that 'the deceased did kill and slay herself by refusing to eat whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed'. This was not how she would have seen it. It was her sacrifice, directly inspired by her Catholic faith.

In her theology, Weil develops a view of God as complete plenitude, utter fullness of being. If this is so, she reasons, then creation must be divine self-limitation. Kenosis. God voluntarily withdraws Himself so that we can be. He is absent from the world. His presence is his absence. The cross is the centre.

This metaphysic implies a rather terrifying ethic. It is only through what Weil called 'decreation' that humans can know the presence of God. We have to remove ourselves to make way for Him. Just as Christ sacrificed himself on a cross, so we must decreate ourselves to allow God in. We must decrease so that He can increase. Weil extends this ethic to human relations. Love of neighbour consists in paying full 'attention' to the other. 'Attention' is a central concept for Weil, and it has been widely influential – in Iris Murdoch's philosophy, for example. For Weil it involves erasing oneself, one's interests and one's projections in order to see things as they really are. It's the self is a vacuum pump: only by removing myself do I make space for the other.

So Weil sought out suffering. She strove to experience the suffering of others. She worked in a factory, travelled to Spain to serve in the civil war, and attempted, unsuccessfully, to join the French resistance after the Second World War broke out. She ended up in Kent, writing, waiting, and starving herself.

To be perfectly frank, I spent a large part of my early life – certainly whilst I an undergraduate here – agreeing with Weil and trying, hopelessly, to live up to the sacrificial ideal she represented. But then, gradually, I stopped believing. To the point where I now find a lot of Weil's life and writing humourless, overblown, lacking in proportion, and in some respects downright dangerous.

Dangerous, because the burdens of sacrifice made into an everyday requirement bear down unequally upon different types and conditions of people. Charges of selfishness aren't applied indiscriminately, any more than demands to think of others before oneself. They fall on the poor, women, and those plagued by a lack of self-worth with more force than on others, and serve to reinforce their status. Overblown and lacking in proportion, because love is generally fulfilling rather than denuding. It is about give and take, not self-abasement before the other: what D.H. Lawrence called 'call and answer'. Something mutual, shared, relational, rather than a gift of self with no hope or expectation of return. That lends itself to abuse – and it is worth asking whether it is our growing sensitivity to sexual abuse which has made us suspicious of 'everyday' sacrifice, or the other way round.

So I grew critical of Weil, and the reasons I once admired her became reasons for rejection. And yet, and yet. I have still chosen Simone as my saint. Saints aren't sensible. They do weird, extreme, mad things. They are hell to live with. They are, perhaps, living caricatures which help us to see some virtue magnified to the point of distortion – a bit like Greek gods. What Weil undoubtedly succeeds in doing is focusing attention on is the self-giving love at the heart of the Christian message. As do the war dead we remember today. But there's an important difference.

It goes back to where I began this address. I began by saying that we have diminished the sphere of sacrifice. We've ceased to see it as an everyday demand, and we have come to think of it as something called forth by exceptional circumstances when some good is threatened, and the only way to defend it is by risking our lives. Sacrifice is demanded not in the normal course of things, but when things go tragically wrong. It is called forth in situations brought about by accident, carelessness, stupidity, evil or some mixture. Like war.

I think this shift represents a moral advance. I think we should endorse rather than critique the fact that in ordinary language we now reserve the word 'sacrifice' for something exceptional, for choosing to act against one's own self-interest when that is a last resort, the only way we can see to preserve a good which is threatened, often with no certainty of the outcome. From this side of that shift, it may actually make more sense that the figure of a man on a cross lies at the heart of Christianity, just as it makes sense that we dedicate one special time each year to collective remembrance of those who gave their lives in war.

What doesn't make sense is turning sacrifice into the lens through which we view love, rather than love the lens through which we view sacrifice. Sacrifice IS something exceptional, something surrounded by tragedy. It is from this perspective that we can better see its true value, and it is in this perspective that, tonight, we remember and give thanks for the sacrifice of so many sons of this house.