



Sermon for Remembrance Sunday

12 November 2017

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It was a very modern kind of terrorist act that sparked the conflagration that became the First World War. At his trial after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, Gavrilo Princip stated under cross examination, "I am a Yugoslav nationalist and I believe in the unification of all South Slavs in whatever form of state and that it be free of Austria." Princip was then asked how he intended to realize his goal; he responded, "By means of terror."

His act set ablaze all Europe, pulling into the vortex of the flames those who cannot have imagined how vast the scale of the sacrifice would come to be.

The 'Great' War, the First World War, was an event in human history when the consciousness of the western world was wrenched from an innocence about life, from a belief in the inevitable forward progress of the human race, to a sense of despair, of a wondering if war would remain one of the permanent features of our existence. It is important to remind ourselves how full of horror that war was.

The British fought that war for four years and three months. The first months of the war were not 'battles' so much as manoeuvres in France and Belgium that ended in a terrible stalemate: both sides became locked in the trenches – 25,000 miles of trenches – long enough to encircle the whole earth. The conviction of the British back home was that the war would be over by Christmas, but by the end of the war the sides of the hastily-constructed trenches were being shored up with the body parts of dead horses, and even of unburied men; the lice were unendurable; the rats were insatiable; trench foot swelled to gangrene. The interminable icy rain of winter turned the trenches into cesspools where men floundered and even drowned. Killed by shell-fire, their bodies dissolved into the slime. The relatively recent inventions of the machine gun and barbed wire ensured that the dominant images of this war would not be those of beautiful horses bearing cavalymen dashing across the fields.

August 4, 1914, was the date of Britain's declaration of war on the Central Powers. By the middle of that November – the retreat from Mons, the Marne, Ypres – most of the original British Army had been destroyed. At the beginning of the war, August 4th, a volunteer had to stand five feet eight to get into the army. By October 11th the need for men was such that the standard was lowered to five feet five. And on November 5th, after the thirty thousand casualties of October, one had to be only five feet three to get in. At the end of the war, half the British infantry were younger than 19.

The way we described our world changed in the course of that war. 'Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant.'¹

And then the war continued, in all its ravaging horror.

The language of Tennyson, the elevated language that was used to describe what lay before the nation with such words as 'the legions vanquishing the foe' gave way to the language of irony. The claustrophobia of life in the trenches was, ironically, only 70 miles away from the normality of life at home in England; one officer on leave had breakfasted in the trenches and dined that same evening at his club in London. It was a bewildering juxtaposition, when the postal system delivered the usual magazines uninterrupted after a simple change of address, even after the slaughter began. Soldiers did not tell the truth about the reality they knew because they did not want to upset the innocent belief that all was going well. The official organs of the 'news' ensured that the reality of the nightmare of that Great War was not described, and not comprehended, at home.

But belatedly, and inevitably, the realization set in that human beings are capable of inflicting unspeakable suffering upon one another.

Statistics concerning the number of casualties from the First and the Second World Wars are difficult and still debated, but it is worth pondering the extent of the tragedy to which they bear witness.

The total number of civilian and military casualties in World War I are estimated by some to be over 37 million people; perhaps 17 million deaths, 20 million wounded. Great Britain and her allies lost 6 million soldiers, Germany and her allies 4. For World War II, the deadliest military conflict in all of human history, estimates range from 65 to 80 million people killed, over 2.5 per cent of the world's population. In that war, closer in time to us, the Soviet Union lost perhaps 25.6 million people, 17 million of them civilians; China, 10 million, 8 million of them civilians; Poland, 6 million, almost all of them civilians (22 per cent of the nation's population); England, almost half a million people.

These figures are astonishing, and almost impossible, really, to comprehend. How do we make sense of war?

We remember.

We remember the innocence and courage and unthinkable sacrifice of those who fought on the battlefields of war. It is a solemn day, for a solemn remembrance. But beyond remembrance is a longing for redemption. What could possibly redeem such slaughter; what could possibly make sense of it?

In the profound mystery that is human life ending in human death, as we seek meaning in all the aspects of our human existence, but especially in the face of tragedy, this is what I believe: that the only blood that could redeem so much innocent blood as was shed in the First World War was a single act of intentional love. What Jesus chose to give for us was everything. To break through the terrible stalemate, the expected usual round of human

¹ *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 21

selfishness and the pain we cause one another, Jesus modelled a radically different way of life, the kind of life that God has always hoped for us to live. It is the kind of life that all of us would live if the Kingdom of God, for which we pray, were to be realized, here in our messy, violent, greedy world of human beings competing and jostling for power and concerned about the best for themselves and their own families and their own clan and nation. Jesus was not just a nice person who refrained from greed and jostling; he was not just an enigmatic prophet who enthralled some people and infuriated others; he was not just a good man who left us some thought-provoking ethical teachings.

It is the Christian belief and bright hope that in Jesus the most high God was manifested in human life, as a human being, but also as the very presence of the very God. The kind of God who would not stop at the sacrifice of this same beloved Son to show us the extent to which love would go, for us. In a way that lies at the heart of the mystery of things, as we contemplate death and life here, today, we contemplate, also, how Jesus chose to give his life as an ultimate act of love and of faith in the God who had sent him.

It is a mystery, how love can conquer death. It is a mystery.

But we know the truth of the sacrifice by the fruit that it bears in human life, our life. Love is the opposite of fear, and this loving act of Jesus once and for all time liberated us from any kind of fear, but especially the fear of death. If God raised up Jesus from the Cross, so can God raise us up at the end of time. And this is what has been promised to us.

So, we are able, now, to live our own lives confidently, lovingly, no longer in innocence, but in gratitude for this great gift of love, and in gratitude for the love of others who imitated Jesus in their own sacrifice of their own lives for a cause they deemed worthy. It is sacrificial love that redeems senseless death, on whatever scale.

Each time that we celebrate the eucharist we accept this sacrifice of love. That is the deeply meaningful ritual of faith that sustains us, amid the violence and sadness and pain of everyday human life.

I have a nephew who is here today: he is 19. My own two sons, at their own universities in America, are 20 and 18-and-a-half. They are exploring all kinds of studies; they play the cello and violin; they were choristers when they were young. I do not know what sacrifices they will be called on to make in the world that they will be living into. But my prayer for them, my ardent prayer, is that they enter into the great and mysterious opportunity of their lives in faith, and hope, and love.

Terrorist acts haunt us now, in this modern age. Particularly, though not exclusively, in nations that have failed their young men, and women, for whom there is only a twisted faith and a complete absence of hope. For those of us who have inherited the great tradition of faith in Christ, every act of love we commit is an act we offer in defiance of the acts of war. Acts of love are the offering of all.

And so we are able to move beyond remembrance to redemption. Jesus said, "God is a God not of the dead, but of the living, for to him all of them are alive." (Luke 20: 38)