



Proper 32, Year B & Remembrance Sunday
November 8, 2009
Mark 12.38-44

A Homily preached by the Very Rev'd Peter G. Elliott

As we approach November 11 this year I recall attending Remembrance Days when I was a child, at the cenotaph in St. Catharines Ontario. Although the days were, at least in my memory, quite often clear but crisp, what I recall particularly were the older veterans on parade, standing very still at attention as wreathes were placed, and names of the fallen read. You could see in their faces and sometimes in the tears, which quietly fell from their eyes, that, for them, this was not some kind of civic duty-- this was a profoundly personal moment of remembering friends who they loved and would see no longer. At some point in the ceremony someone would remind us of the reason for the date: the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918 when the armistice was signed to bring to an end the first world war, a war where over 20 million lost their lives.

In the 91 years that have followed 1918, warfare has continued. The Second World War followed, and of course we're very conscious that we are, as a country, at war today with 133 soldiers killed in Afghanistan. According to the United Nations, there are six active wars and as many as seventeen smaller conflicts currently underway, which have so far consumed as many as one million lives. It is fitting therefore that this morning we take the time within this Sunday morning to remember those who have lost their lives, those families whose lives have been irrevocably changed because of war, and those who, although they survived war were forever changed by the horrors they witnessed. They need our prayers: and the world needs people who look at the world as it is and imagine a better future.

This is why Christian commemorations of Remembrance Day, like this one today, always include a strong focus on God's dream for a world of peace with justice for all. This is the hope to which we are called, the possibility that we are given of a future where there is no more sorrow or crying, neither death but eternal life. Scripture images this as the City of God, a place where there is freedom and light for all people. For Christians this is not simply the hope of life beyond this life, this is the hope of a new and better world made possible as we order our lives in relationship to the true and living God who is our source and our destination.

It's a peculiar aspect of Christian faith that we both see the reality of the present moment with its warfare and suffering and glimpse the possibility of life lived in the fullness of God's presence. It's a classic 'both/and' and it calls for us to view our lives and the life of the planet with honesty—seeing the good, the bad and ugly—but also with the possibility that things can change, things can be better. It was the late Senator Robert Kennedy who paraphrased George Bernard Shaw when he said, "Some people see things as they are and ask 'why'; I dream things that have never been and ask 'why not?'"

So I want to appeal to you this morning as people of faith and hope because I know you're people who want to speak honestly about the condition of the world today. I know you're the kinds of people who don't want your religion sugar-coated but need to know that churches are places where truth is acknowledged and reality is spoken of. I would much rather be part of a Christian community that acknowledges Remembrance Day than a place that blithely goes on with its agenda neglecting the importance of remembering. In our tradition, memory plays a huge role. Each time we meet for Eucharist, at the heart of the words of the liturgy we hear the priest,

standing in the place of Christ reciting the sacred words "Do this in remembrance of me." We know the power of remembering: but remembrance within our tradition is not to stay in the past, it is to bring the past forward so that the present and the future can be transformed. It is to be so affected by the remembrance of Jesus that his life and light change the way we perceive things and create us into being people through whom the light of God shines.

That's where Christian hope comes from: the transforming light of Christ that calls us to see things differently and to hope and work for a new world. A great illustration of that is found in the gospel reading we have heard from the Gospel according to St. Mark. It comes to us from the very last section of Mark's gospel, and immediately preceding the story of the widow's mite was the account of how Jesus cast out the moneychangers from the temple in Jerusalem. Like we seek to be, Jesus was utterly realistic about the forces of corruption and greed which so much marked the society in which he lived. And far from being 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild, in the turning over of the tables of the money changers in the temple and casting them out with a whip, Jesus was a passionate warrior, an activist, calling for integrity and holiness in the religious centre of his world.

So it's not surprising that the location of today's gospel story is across from the temple: it's like he's sitting across the street--no surprise there—and teaching. What he rails against is the hypocrisy of religious leaders: folks who utter long prayers and wear fancy robes but rob the widows and the orphans. And wouldn't you know it, just then a widow goes to the temple and quietly places in the treasury two coins, apparently all she had. Jesus points her out to the disciples saying that she gave more than the others who made a great show because she gave all that she had.

Now much is made of this story: it's referenced through almost every church fundraising program I've ever been involved with. It's used to justify all sorts of things from giving a pittance to worthy causes, to not giving at all. And I think we miss the point of the story: it's not so much about what she gave or didn't give, it's Jesus being critical of a system where the poor are exploited by religious taxes. She did in fact give everything that she had and this isn't because she was noble, it was because she didn't have a choice. If she didn't contribute, she stood the real possibility of being arrested and thrown into prison. She was a widow and in that culture that meant that she had no one to provide for her. Within the social structure of Jesus time she was on the bottom rung. Sure she gave everything but that only increases the tragedy of the story. And it reminds us that conditions haven't changed all that much. The poor are still expected to carry more than their fair share.

Armed forces are often disproportionately made up of soldiers from deprived economic circumstances; jobs where there's high risk of injury or health hazards are filled by the poor. There's not a major city in Canada where you can walk in the downtown and not confront people who are living outside and often without enough to eat. Jesus critique of religious hypocrites begins as a memory from the past and comes down through the ages to confront us today. Christians are called to know the reality of our time and then to commit ourselves to build a better world by the grace of God.

A few months ago, a friend of mine went to a fundraiser called "message in a bottle". What they did was invite celebrities to write their response to the question "What is the meaning of life" and their brief responses in their own handwriting were placed in empty wine bottles, with the name of the celebrity placed on the label in front. My friend bid on and won the bottle signed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

When she opened the bottle she read Archbishop's response to the meaning of life, written in Desmond's own hand. He wrote: "You are made by love for loving; you are made by goodness for being good. You are a God carrier and so are a very special person, God's viceroy, God's representative."

When you think of the life and witness of Archbishop Tutu: how he had to stand against forces of racism that did not acknowledge him as a full human being, when you remember that he was initially prohibited from living in the Bishop's house in Capetown when he became the first black bishop of that diocese, when you recall the violence and loss of life that the struggle for human rights generated, his words become all the more powerful, "You are made by love for loving; you are made by goodness for being good. You are a God carrier and so are a very special person, God's viceroy, God's representative." These words come from a Christian who saw first hand the hard realities of life but whose vision of God transformed his perspective to see that each of us have a role to play in the unfolding of God's will for the world.

Boris Yeltsin, in an interview, was asked how he coped with the ending of the Soviet Union. He responded that he thought of that Polish shipyard worker, Lech Walensa who led the Solidarity movement for his people and he said that if someone had the courage to stand up for his people he could accept the ending of power in his country. When Lech Walensa was asked what gave him the courage to stand up to injustice and a totalitarian regime, he said it was Dr. Martin Luther King whose witness on behalf of his people ended segregation and brought a new era of civil rights to the US. And apparently when Dr. King was asked who had inspired him, he said it was Rosa Parks, the African American seamstress in Montgomery Alabama who refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger.

If a seamstress can inspire a preacher, who can inspire a union organizer, who can inspire a world leader, then all of us have our part to play. Christians are not people who say that there's nothing we can do. We are people whose lives have been so touched by the love of God that we seek to make a difference in the world, to show by our words and actions that we are people of hope who believe not in our own power, but in God's power working in us to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. In a world that continues to be marked by war, in a time when there are too many people whose lives are diminished by poverty, in a time of economic distress and uncertainty, the world needs people who remember, who have hope and who know that our lives, by the grace of God can make a difference. May Archbishop Tutu's words speak to you this day, "You are made by love for loving; you are made by goodness for being good. You are a God carrier and so are a very special person, God's viceroy, God's representative." Amen.