

Sermon on Remembrance Sunday, 13 November 2022

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Greater love...

On the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour, a Canadian High School teacher stood up to speak to the whole school assembly.

‘Imagine you are hungry,’ she began. ‘You have not had anything to eat for days. Would you eat candles? Wax candles, just to get something into your stomach?’

‘Imagine growing up,’ she continued, ‘in a family of four brothers, and three of you are drafted into the army during the Second World War. Your older brother is missing in action, your younger brother killed by an explosion and you survive with great hardship.

‘This was my father’s reality,’ she said. ‘He ate candles to survive.’

In the hushed silence of the assembly hall the teacher continued. ‘My father, along with his two brothers and too many young men, was drafted and forced to fight for an oppressive, dictatorial Nazi government. This regime not only killed and destroyed the lives of countless citizens and people all over the world; it also traumatised my home country and its surviving citizens. Both my parents carried their emotional wounds long past the war.’

Those are the words of German-born Claudia Scheuermann. For years in her adopted country of Canada she felt like an observer, an embarrassment at every Remembrance Day service or parade. Until, finally, she found the courage to tell *her* story; to speak about the same courage and hopes; the same fear and humanity and inhumanity of her own people; the ‘enemy’.

Famously, shockingly, Jesus once uttered three game-changing words; words that had never before been spoken; words designed to change the world: ‘Love your enemy.’

And these three words challenge that deep tribal instinct within every human being. They are counter-intuitive; impossible in those situations where the 'enemy' has done unspeakable things.

And yet, with God we believe all things to be possible; all things forgivable.

So, who are your enemies? Who are you opposed to, estranged from; angry with?

And how do we love these people?

With difficulty, no doubt, for love is almost always the more difficult choice. And it is a choice; a choice to see beyond difference to a shared humanity. That's not to say, of course, that love should shy away from conflict; love requires always that we speak up for justice and name injustice.

The beginning, I think, of learning to love the enemy, whoever that might be, is to first look into their eyes and then listen to their story; because once you've looked into the eyes of a fellow human being, once you know something of their story, it becomes less possible to dismiss and belittle and demonise from the distance of ignorance.

On this 11th day of the 11th month, we gather not only to remember the courage and sacrifice of our own; but also to remember the same courage and the same sacrifice of all who were and are dragged into war.

Today is not an excuse to parade or indulge our patriotism; it is a sobering reminder of how ideologies can cause decent people to do indecent, inhuman things.

Today is not a day to sing jingoistic songs; it is a day for silence and introspection; a day to remember not only the potential for courage and sacrifice within every human soul, but also to face the potential for hate and cruelty and all the isms and phobias that sit within us all.

Today is about acknowledging our own complicity in the lack of peace in our world; our holding back of forgiveness, our vilification or scapegoating of the 'other'. It is, above all, about acknowledging the intrinsic worth and dignity of every human life. It is about working for peace in the small decisions of life; which begins with the next one we make.

Today, we remember in order to re-member what has been dismembered; to learn from our past, to find and build upon what is common to our humanity; to re-member peace.

Perhaps the final words of Claudia Scheuermann to that generation of children in that Canadian High School could speak to us in this world of increasing polarisation and alternative truth. Speaking of the enemy, she said:

‘We want to make it possible to hear their voices. We want to listen to them, feel with them, imagine their lives and struggles and, hopefully one day, carry their songs and their stories into a world of peace.’

Let me end with a true story.

It was a bleak day in the bleak year of 1944 in Moscow. Some 20,000 German prisoners of war were being marched across Red Square. The mood was grim and angry. Most people present had had a husband, a brother, a son, a father, a lover killed in the conflict. The police were having trouble holding them back behind the cordon. Some spectators were ready to tear the now-vanquished enemy limb from limb.

The captured officers led the parade. Heads held high, in an attitude perceived by the crowds as arrogance, they were jeered and spat upon as they passed. And then came the ordinary soldiers – a very different picture. Men on crutches, barely able to hobble across the square; men wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, men whose eyes were pools of terror; men wracked by exhaustion, starvation and abject humiliation.

Silence fell over Red Square. The people who had suffered so much at the hands of this enemy now looked into the eyes and faces of thousands of fellow human beings teetering on the very edge of desperation.

And then one woman broke through the cordon. In her hand she held a piece of black bread from her own kitchen; bread she could ill afford to give away. Before anyone could stop her, she thrust it into the hands of a German prisoner. Others saw her gesture. Others also had bread in their homes. Others also recognised the human being behind the enemy uniform and broke through the cordon to give what bread they could. Soon the scene of triumphalist scorn turned to one of

human compassion. A bleak moment in human history became a moment of transformation.

On this 11th day of this 11th month, what scrap of bread do you, do I, have to offer?

