

Self-giving Love

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday of Pentecost (Proper 27 (32))

11 November 2018

A centenary -- the hundredth anniversary -- of something, of anything really, is a big deal. When I was a child, the US celebrated the centenary of the Civil War. From 1960 to 1965 I read and reread the Sunday colour supplements; I moved toy soldiers around a plastic landscape that had actually come with my plastic dinosaurs, but it served for my historic recreations. I did not think at that time about the centenary we commemorate today. Despite annual Armistice Day commemorations it wasn't until I was older that the stories from my parents and their friends, even from one of my first year university teachers, piqued my interest in the events of 1914-1918. Now I have some sense of what it means when we say that one hundred years ago today the First World War came to an end at the eleventh hour, on the eleventh day, in the eleventh month of 1918.

The Allied victory, if victory it was, came at a terrible price, especially in the countries where the fiercest fighting had taken place, like France and Belgium. Few conflicts have demonstrated more clearly the futility of war than the so-called Great War, and at its end

spontaneous celebrations broke out, even in our Presbyterian Toronto. Bells were rung and sirens sounded at the news, even though 11am in Flanders was around 3am here. People poured into the streets in their pajamas to cheer and sing, play the bagpipes and get up impromptu parades. Almost no one went to work that day.

But this country, and this city, had suffered greatly. About 7% of the population was in uniform over the course of the war, of whom just over 60,000 died. This parish also suffered: 52 parishioners at Redeemer died in war between 1914 and 1918. I remember the devastation our parish felt by deaths from AIDS in the choir and the rest of the congregation, and that was a far smaller group. What it would be like to have 52 of our fellow parishioners go to war and never return I cannot imagine.

In the months and years that followed the euphoria of the Armistice itself, Canada and Toronto and Church of the Redeemer went about the work of coming to terms with all that they had lost. The parish commissioned and on Sunday October 24th 1920, only two years after the end of the war, dedicated the memorial window we still see in the West Transept, behind the choir. In keeping with our long tradition of lay leadership and extraordinarily for 1920, the service of dedication was primarily led by laymen who had lost their sons in the war. (Even Redeemer didn't allow women to be readers or have any other liturgical leadership roles until the 1980s). The congregation itself was large and included many friends and relatives of those who died: a poignant notice in the Toronto Star ad for the service particularly invited the "officers and men" whose names were on the honour roll of those who served to attend.

It's an extraordinary window, a group of windows really, honouring the service of those who were at the Front, and especially those who did not return. The images are all of suffering, death, and loss and although there are quotes from the Bible, the Prayer Book, and the Hymnal

there are no Scriptural scenes (unless you count the crucifixion). It is very different from most stained glass windows. It represents, I think, the attempt to give meaning of that suffering, death, and loss. It doesn't completely succeed, I don't suppose anything would. It's a lot to ask of stained glass. But it gives voice, in its images and colours, to their conviction that Jesus and Jesus' sufferings are a model to which that suffering conformed, as in the case of the Red Cross corpsman who we see supporting a wounded soldier and offering him a drink as the Risen Christ looks on. To those men and women who survived, the key to understand what service at the front and even death at the front meant was the cross of Christ. It dominates the whole window, and through it the deaths of soldiers like the one portrayed fallen at the foot of the Cross and the hard and risky labour of Red Cross corpsmen and ambulance drivers are transformed into examples of self-giving love.

Their comfort in loss was the belief that serving and dying for a cause that went beyond their own individual lives somehow united them to the serving and dying of their Master, Jesus. We might now, many of us, doubt that belief and see their service as profoundly misdirected, but, if so, this is not the time to give voice to those feelings. Now is a time to grieve with them, our forebears in faith here at the corner of Avenue Road and Bloor, and admire the strength and depth of faith that could find meaning in what they, their families, and their friends had undergone. Now is a time to join with them in the prayerful hope expressed in the collect written a century ago for this day of remembrance, the hope that war and violence should cease in all the world. Indeed to do even more than pray for that day, but to become co-workers for that cause.

Appropriately enough self-giving, sacrificial love also lies at the heart of the readings for this Sunday morning, as we near the end of the Pentecost season. This is self-giving love in the service of God, of God's prophet or God's Temple. In the first reading we heard about Elijah and

the Widow of Zarephath. This story is usually recalled in the context of Luke 4.25-27 where Jesus reminded the congregation at his sermon in Nazareth that there were many widows in Israel during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, but God sent Elijah to a Gentile woman and her son. This reminder of how the Israelites had so turned away from YHWH to worship Baal that God's prophet could only find faith in Sidon was not popular with that congregation!

Today however we remember the Widow of Zarephath not because she prefigures the faithful Gentiles who would become part of the Jesus movement. We remember her because she believed that giving all that she had to God's prophet would save her and her son from certain starvation. Her faith in the promise that Elijah made saved them all: her, the prophet, and her son. And so she prefigures the poor widow that Jesus saw bringing her offering to the Temple in today's Gospel.

That Gospel passage describes how Jesus went to the treasury and watched the crowd of people bringing their tithes and other offerings to put in the collection boxes there. The treasury itself, and those boxes into which offerings were paid, was in the first courtyard of the Temple proper, called the Court of Women because women were not allowed beyond it (non-Levitical men could enter as far as the next, and smaller, Court of Israelites, but only Levites and priests could enter any further than that). Since it was the only court into which all Jews who were ritually clean were admitted it was spacious. There were square chambers at the corners of this court, and the offering boxes were apparently set between these corner chambers on the north, south, and east sides. So Jesus and his disciples were in a prominent and busy space, which would have been noisy with the sounds of coins being put into the boxes.

Unlike the ostentatious scribes Jesus described in the first part of our Gospel, who want the best seats in the house, walk about in their clericals and say long prayers for show, and eat up

widows' wealth, this woman was self-effacing. She came in as part of a crowd, slipped her two coins in the offering box, and presumably left again. But she did not go unnoticed. Just as Elijah noticed the widow gathering sticks at the gates of Zarephath, Jesus noticed the poor widow in the Temple. He understood what those few coins meant to her: unlike the wealthy, who gave large sums but didn't really notice the draw on their abundance, she has given out of her poverty all that she had to give.

As the son of a craftsman in a Galilean village and as an itinerant rabbi in the same poor region, Jesus had far more experience with people living in poverty than rich people in Jerusalem did. He respected the widow and her poverty, and he respected her gift. Although this would be a good text for any Tithing Sunday, it would be a mistake to see the widow's sole contribution as financial. What Jesus was commending in her was the love for God that prompted her gift. Like the widow of Zarephath, like the grieving parents, widows, relatives and friends who gave the West Transept window, she was moved by self-giving sacrificial love.

We don't need a drought or a war to be motivated by that kind of love. We need the examples of our forebears in faith, both in the Scriptures and here at the corner, who teach us not only to feel such love, but how to properly direct it, toward the love of God and our neighbour. And to teach us what the dangers are of allowing ourselves to put the trust in princes and human institutions that we should place only in God. That path leads to suffering and loss, however we may come to terms with it. On this Sunday of Remembrance, let us pray for all those who have suffered and continue to suffer because of war. And let us rededicate ourselves to the cause of peace, God's peace that surpasses all understanding. Amen.