

Remembrance Day
Grace Church in Scarborough

11 Nov 2012
Rev David Howells

November 11th is a day to remember that soldiers die believing they were sent for a reason, a noble cause, to defend, to liberate. Women and men of the military are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice and we owe them our respect and gratitude.

November 11th is a time for national reflection. We remember those who gave their lives willingly. We remember the shattered lives of soldiers who return wounded not only physically, but psychologically. We remember that the sacrifice is not just that of a single soldier but their entire family and often an entire community. We remember the overwhelming, countless loss of civilians who didn't choose to die. We remember how easy it is to begin a war but not to end it. There is no such thing as a short war—the effects of violence remain long after the last shot is fired. We remember the sacrifice of those who work for peace and to end violence. We remember that violence does not happen just between nations but contaminates our entire society and our way of thinking.

On November 11th we remember, with gratitude. On November 11th, we remember and pray that war will be no more. Anglican thinker, Elizabeth May.

I read this recently of Paul Fussell, an American writer who died recently aged 88.

It was never clear when Paul lost his innocence. It might have been that November night in 1944 when his rifle platoon took a wrong turn in a small wood in Alsace. He was 20. The ground was cluttered with strange objects; when the sun rose, he found himself among the open-eyed corpses of Germans who had been killed the day before.

Or it might have been what happened a few months later. His unit ran into an artillery barrage in which pieces of shell ploughed into his back and leg. As he lay there, bellowing with anger, he felt a fine red spray falling on him; his buddy Edward Hudson had been so riddled with bullets that the contents of his torso were forced out of the holes in the back of his field jacket. Those who observed wars from afar, Mr. Fussell dryly noted, failed to realize how often soldiers were hurt by the violent impact of pieces of their friends.

And I read this historical information about the second world war.

The statistics of the war are almost mind-numbing. Estimates differ, but up to 70 million people died as a direct consequence of the fighting between 1939 and 1945, about two-thirds of them non-combatants, making it in absolute terms the deadliest conflict ever. Nearly one in ten Germans died, and 30% of their army. About 15 million Chinese perished and 27 million Soviets. Squeezed between two totalitarian neighbours, Poland lost 16% of its population, about half of them Jews who were part of Hitler's final solution. On average, nearly 30,000 people were being killed every day.

2012 military spending: Canada \$24.7b, UK \$62.7b, USA \$711b, World 1,735b.

In Afghanistan since 2007 to the end of last year only 8,500 civilians were killed, 2/3 by Insurgents, 1/3 by Coalition and Government troops.

Human beings have an attraction to warfare that I find astonishing. We have, for most of human history, put our best collective efforts, the first of our budgets and the best of our brains in to devising ways of killing each other. But essentially, in a war, we agree to throw *our* children at *their* children with the intent of them killing each other. The winner of a war, as someone put it, is determined not by who is wrong or who is right, but by who is left.

Collectively, as a species, we are quickly capable of being belligerent, aggressive and murderous. The Rolling Stones once sang of the Devil, "I rode the General's rank when the Blitzkrieg raged and the bodies stank." The utter evil of warfare seems encoded in our makeup.

The shocking contrast to this bleak reality is the collection of personal stories. It is, amazingly often, in the midst of this collective failure of warfare, that heroism, self-sacrifice, valour, costly sharing, deep commitments in love, in generosity and in kindness abound.

The rear gunner who faces terror and holds his seat while the plane is attacked again and again.

German and British troops playing soccer together on Christmas day. Families huddled together with

strangers sharing food and hope under falling bombs. Individuals seeking out ways to work, serve and help for no personal gain. Men and women swallowing fear and horror to go forward, for the sake of those they love, into the jaws of death.

Individually we humans can rise above the evil which threatens to engulf us and reveal the self-giving love which is Christ-like. With the resilience of those pesky dandelions, the goodness of our creator is encoded in us, and human generosity seems indestructibly part of who we are made to be.

Jesus sat in the temple of Jerusalem and watched the corruption of the clergy, the self-serving charity of the rich and the sham that Judaism had become. And in the midst of it he was overcome by the saintliness of a simple older lady's giving.

The psalmist, looking at the great works of his people, quietly warns, Unless the Lord builds the house, their labour is in vain who build it.

Where does this leave us? Are we just like autumn leaves blown this way and that by winter's winds? No. We are just in life, whether in war or in peace. We live in the tension of the pull between Good and Evil. Between the Way of Christ and the Way of the Enemy.

The work of being a faithful and committed Christian is to pay attention. Attention to both sides of everything that we encounter. We need to do the hard work of looking beneath the surface. We need to ask who grew and harvested this coffee? Were they paid fairly? Was the land ravaged or cared for? As well as asking, Who can I share this with? Can I welcome someone to my home, my church with a good cup of coffee? Did I give thanks to God for this fine drink?

We need to ask why, in our name, our country keeps a readiness for war. We need to ask why our neighbour's nation seems constantly to be at war in far away lands, against undeveloped nations of peasants and farmers. We must ask why we have people sleeping on the streets and families needing food banks while we debate buying fighter jets. None of these questions have simple answers, and solutions are difficult to find, and rarely are the politicians or generals bad people.

Edmund Burke, the English philosopher said, 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.'

And another said "The price of peace is eternal vigilance". "Stay Awake!" said Jesus.

Conrad Hilton, the founder of the Hilton Hotel Empire, spent money out of his own pocket to run the following prayer in many major American magazines on July 4th, 1952: The 2nd war had ended, another loomed, (and now Iran is in our neighbour's sights and China looms large)

Our Father in heaven,

We pray that You save us from ourselves.

The world that You have made for us, to live in peace, we have made into an armed camp. We live in fear of war to come. We are afraid of "the terror that flies by night, and the arrow that flies by day, the pestilences that walks in darkness and the destruction that wastes at noon-day." (Psalm 91)

We have turned from You to go our selfish way. We have broken Your commandments and denied Your truth. We have left Your altars to serve the false gods of money and pleasure and power.

Forgive us and help us.

Now, darkness gathers around us, and we are confused in all our counsels. Losing faith in You, we lose faith in ourselves.

Inspire us with wisdom, all of us of every color, race and creed, to use our wealth, our strength to help our brother, instead of destroying him. Help us to do Your will as it is done in heaven, and to be worthy of Your promise of peace on earth. Fill us with new faith, new strength and new courage, that we may win the Battle for Peace.

Be swift to save us, dear God, before the darkness falls.