

Facing The Reality, Embracing The Vision

Micah 4:1-4; Matthew 5:1-12

Remembrance Sunday

6th November 2011

When Evelyn and I were in London, England last March, we visited the National Army Museum¹ in Chelsea where there was an exhibition of a different kind than one would usually expect at military establishment like this. The presentation was entitled “Wives and Sweethearts” and chronicled love letters along with other communications such as love tokens, diaries and photographs sent between lovers during different wars over a period of around 200 years. It was quite fascinating!

In one letter, dated November 1943, Jean Leonard wrote to her husband Ivor, stationed in Burma: “It is so grand to be able to look forward to the lovely future, I do hope that this old war will soon be over and that you will soon be home,” and she signed off with 37 kisses.

Then in June 1918 Private Charlie Cole wrote to his wife from the trenches of northern France, “I am longing for the time to come to see you all once again ... I shall be glad to get home to have a nice meal with you again.”

Then, in June 1944 Major Anthony Ryshworth-Hill wrote from north Africa to Valerie Erskine Howe, who was on Salisbury Plain in the Auxiliary Territorial Service: “Valerie, shall we become engaged in a sort of distant way so that we are sort of linked together until we next meet? How would that suit you?” In accepting his proposal, she writes, “Anthony... yes, Anthony, shall we?” and signs off the letter by adding, “I’ve always loved every little bit of you since, I believe, the pyramids were built or perhaps a couple of years before.”

“You cannot imagine how much I like to read your letters,” gushes a French actress to a Lieutenant in 1788, “I kiss you with all my soul and I am yours for life.” But, unbeknownst to this actress there’s a bit of a love triangle or quadrangle going on behind the scenes because there is also a letter on display from the Lieutenant’s mistress who was requesting he send her money despite the fact she was living with another man. Now, I wonder how that one all worked out when they all found out what was going on behind their backs! Wouldn’t we love to know!

As Evelyn and I read the various letters and looked at the many artefacts on display, we remarked on how touching and heart-warming an experience it was. How romantic these wonderful expressions of love, we thought, across such great distances and from moments far back in time. But then, suddenly, we would have a reality check, remembering the backdrop, the context in which these love-letters and love-tokens were sent. They came from the midst of some of the very worst times known to humanity. They were exchanged by people suffering the horrors of war – whether the hell of the front-line in the field of battle or suffering the hell of separation at home, wondering whether loved ones would ever come back safe and sound.

Much literature, of course, both fact and fiction, has been devoted to this very theme. Love against the backdrop of the dreadfulness of war. Love that triumphs over the greatest obstacles that can be pitted against it. And no matter how greatly authors try to focus on the romantic aspects of the relationship, yet, again and again, the horrors of war keep coming through. They will not be dismissed. They will not be forgotten.

Reflecting on the exhibition at the National Army Museum, I couldn’t help but think back to that wonderful and thought-provoking novel “Atonement” by Ian McEwen which highlights these very themes of love and war.²

In the 1930s, a young man, Robbie Turner (no relation!) falls in love with Cecilia, a fellow student at Cambridge University and the daughter of the family for whom his parents work. Their relationship seems to be taking off, so to speak, when suddenly Robbie is falsely accused of sexually assaulting Cecilia’s sister. As a result Robbie is sent to jail and is only released 2 or 3 years later on condition that he enlists in the army and goes to fight in the war which has just begun. Robbie and Cecilia are still very deeply in love but cruelly separated through war. All Robbie can think of is getting back home as quickly as possible and he tries to blot the war out of his consciousness, in denial of what is going on around about him.

But reality breaks through and Robbie is brought face-to-face with the horror and brutality of war, especially as he is caught up in the retreat to Dunkirk in 1940. As he and his army comrades trudge wearily back to the French port, there are gun flashes everywhere and they are constantly having to avoid the dive-bombers strafing the roads lined with retreating troops. Around about them, says the writer, “Walking with the soldiers were families hauling suitcases, bundles, babies, or holding the hands of children. The only human sound heard, piercing the din of engines, was the crying of babies.”

In the midst of this mayhem, Robbie is shocked to see a young mother carrying a little boy struggling to find shelter. But, before he can get them to the safety of a nearby farmhouse, he hears the rising howl of an enemy plane and, in seconds, the pair are obliterated by a shell, the only remains being the leg of the child stuck in a tree. Says the writer, “Nightmares had become a science. Someone, a mere human, had taken the time to dream up this satanic howling. And what success! It was the sound of panic itself, mounting and straining towards the extinction they all knew, individually, to be theirs.”³

McEwen’s novel is painful to read because its graphic quality gives the shock and revulsion of war a terrifying

immediacy. And the way in which the love affair between Robbie and Cecilia is so overshadowed by the brutality of war, in which survival becomes the most pressing concern, gives it a greater poignancy.

Novels like this so easily reel us in with the promise and hope of a romantic story only then to plunge us into a world of horror we would rather avoid. Yet, if we are truly going to fulfil our act of remembrance when the 11 November comes around we have to recall and confront the awfulness of war. As we recite the names on honour rolls and pay tribute to their courage and sacrifice, nonetheless let us never forget the reality of what they faced, the trials they endured, the sheer awfulness of armed conflict. The word “war” is such a short word and slips off the tongue so easily that we tend to overlook the terrible reality that lies behind it.

It is imperative, therefore, that we remember the true nature of war at this time. However, no act of remembrance is complete if it simply remains at the point of being transfixed by past horrors. Any authentic act of remembrance also has to be oriented towards the future. It has to embrace a vision of a world that is radically different, a world where there is not just an absence of war but a world that is truly at peace. Long ago, the prophet Micah envisioned just such a world when he said, “God will settle disputes among the nations, among the great powers near and far. They will hammer their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again. Everyone will live in peace among their own vineyards and fig trees, and no one will make them afraid. The Lord Almighty has promised this.”⁴ And though war and violence and terror has plagued – and continues to plague – our planet, yet this vision has stuck with those of the Judaeo-Christian heritage as an assurance of things to come, as a promise of a future world at peace..

Let’s be realistic, though. Visions are just that, aren’t they? Visions. They are just words and thoughts. They never really do anything. Or, do they? 48 years ago, in Washington, Dr. Martin Luther King spoke these unforgettable words, “I say to you today, my friends, that despite the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream ...”⁵ And he painted a picture of a time to come when the lot of African-Americans would change. With continuing discrimination, most doubted it. They could just not envisage it. But then, his vision came to pass with the growing status of blacks in American Society, with the election of a black president and with the possibility now of two black men facing each other as the presidential candidates of their respective parties. All of which gives us the hope and the confidence that other visions, if we cling to them and believe in them, visions such as Micah’s vision of a world at peace, will also come to pass one day.

Of course, to make this vision of peace come true, it’s not enough just to entertain it in mind and imagination. We have to work at it, tirelessly translating it into practical

reality – remembering that we are called by Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, not just to envision peace, or wish for peace, or think about peace, but to be “makers of peace”,⁶ actively working for peace wherever and however we can.

This means making peace at the personal level of our everyday lives by doing such things as: Curtailing our angry responses. Taking our frustrations to God instead of taking them out on other people. Controlling our tongues. Monitoring our prejudices. Confessing our mistakes. Seeking and extending forgiveness. Grasping those opportunities others may miss to bring reconciliation among friends. And all so that, by making peace at the personal level, that peace might then spread throughout the world at large.

But can ordinary people like us really do this? Can we honestly be expected to have the necessary skills for such a daunting peace-making task? One writer believes God has given us all the tools to build a lasting peace, when he says:

<i>Isn't it strange</i>	<i>Each is given a bag of</i>
<i>That princes and kings,</i>	<i>tools,</i>
<i>And clowns that caper</i>	<i>A shapeless mass,</i>
<i>In sawdust rings,</i>	<i>A book of rules;</i>
<i>And common people</i>	<i>And each must make –</i>
<i>Like you and me</i>	<i>Ere life has flown –</i>
<i>Can build peace for</i>	<i>A stumbling block</i>
<i>eternity?</i>	<i>Or a stepping stone.¹</i>

At the end of the day, whether or not our vision of peace becomes reality, whether or not we can build peace for eternity, will depend – not on whether we have the necessary tools for the job – but on each of us making a very important choice. In the task of making peace, will we be stumbling blocks or stepping stones?

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¹ At the Heart of War - 'Wives and Sweethearts' Exhibition at the National Army Museum
www.nam.ac.uk/press/heart-war-wives-sweethearts-exhibition-national-army-museum

² Ian McEwenn, “Atonement”, Seal Books Canada, 2001

³ Ibid., p. 302

⁴ Micah 4:1-4

⁵ Martin Luther King, “I Have A Dream”, 1963, © The Martin Luther King Foundation

⁶ Matthew 5: 9