

REFLECTION 5TH NOVEMBER 2023

First thank you Fai for handing this sermon slot over to me. In this place we work together. We support each other. We respect each other. These are core values of St Andrews.

I'm not sure if this sermon is half baked having started on Tuesday evening or whether it is one that has been fermenting for a number of years. I think may be the latter.

I did struggle to find a way into it.

I settled on this.

A few months ago, I had a Couch Surfer staying with me. Couch Surfing is a way Backpackers get free accommodation for being good guests.

This night I had a young man in his mid-twenties. He had been traveling the world since before Covid.

He was an interesting young man, and we talked our way to midnight without realising it. But all evening I had a burning question. I wanted to ask it but felt uneasy. I was not comfortable. Yet the drive to do so was exceedingly powerful.

For me there was an elephant in the room. This young man was from Ukraine. Young Ukrainian men have been barred from leaving Ukraine. They are expected to fight for their country. For their mothers

and sisters, for the children and the elderly.

So why was he not in Ukraine?

My discomfort was that I was not fully understanding where this 'driver' desire to ask, was coming from. Why did I feel so strongly about him sitting in my living room while his countrymen (mainly men) were at the front line? Why was it so strongly in my mind that this is where he should be?

It would horrify me to think of my sons and grandsons being placed in this position if New Zealand is threatened. But still I wanted to know why he was in my living room and not in a muddy trench at home.

Is this cultural conditioning?

I asked my grandfather if he would have volunteered for the First World War if he knew what he does now as to why it was fought.

He replied after a few minutes thought. "When I was young at school I learnt the poetry of the great battles. Waterloo, the Crimea: Half a league half a league onwards into the valley of death rode the 500 hundred.

And on the walls were prints of the battles

His fear was the war would be over before he arrived.

He volunteered at 19.

Did his answer imply he was conditioned to fight!!!

Is this why I wanted to ask this young man why he was not in Ukraine?

Are we conditioned that young men must defend our territory?

Or is the involvement in war for men deeper. Those who study primates especially the Chimpanzee show that the role of the males of the troupe is to defend their territory. They regularly patrol the borders. They look out from high ground to see what the neighbouring group are up to.

Is this why young men's frontal lobe develops later than young woman? Does it make them more willing to take risk on the battlefield, to obey orders?

Was my question of why my guest had not returned home more deeply primal?

The Hebrew Scriptures normalise Warfare. A time for war and a time for peace.

'In the springtime when Kings went to war' as we heard in the reading this morning.

The recorders of the 'creation', 'early history' narratives of the peoples of the Tigris and Euphrates record that War entered following the 'fall' and the 'flood' when one of Noah's sons become the first great

worrier. Tribalism formed and we get the tower of Babel.

I didn't ask my question knowing it was more about me than my guest.

And we are here just one day after the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. The signing of the armistice to end the fighting in the Great War.

Great to describe the dimensions? Great in that it was to be the war to end all wars? Which was the belief and hope at the time.

They had had a time for war, now was the time for peace. A peace for all time?

Why did they want it to be the end of war?

I'm sure there are many reasons depending who was asked.

The economic cost!

The loss of personal.

The defeat of one side.

The loss of Russia to communism

But for the men in the trenches there was a clear reason.

These men went through hell.

For those killed in the war, and there were 10 million, the war was over but for the rest the war went on.

My Granddad witnessed two of his commanding officers being shot by a sniper before his eyes. On the same day.

He grew accustomed to seeing decaying bodies in no-man's land, bodies of young men he knew.

He was gassed, he was wounded by a hand grenade that failed to explode correctly.

When looking for a reading from my grandfather's memoirs I went looking for the 11th of Nov. He was in a barrack in England waiting to return to France. Free beer was provided. Many of the young men were so drunk that they did not make it back to their beds. Were they trying to block out the trauma of war?

As a family we were lucky that Granddad carried the trauma in a way that did not impact greatly on those around him.

In my grandfather's memoirs he talks of the close friendships on the battlefield. The mention of Alac Kelly in the reading this morning. In reading the years following the war this close friend does not appear. They were loyal and inseparable

during their time at the front line, covering each other's back. And in foolhardy youthfulness volunteering for dangerous missions. But not a mention of him upon return. Except an appendix written a few years after the rest. This man took to the bottle. Had a marriage where he abused his wife until she left him, he could not hold down a job and died in his forties. Granddad regretted he could do nothing for him.

Granddad did not talk of the war for many years, no one would understand the trauma he carried inside him. The trauma showed though as he farewelled his nephews to the Second World War. His namesake born when he was in the Somme did not come back.

When I was a young minister I watched men at Anzac Parades, they reminded me of granddad. They held a space that those around could not understand. They had a sad comradeship built of a common experience of pain and horror.

Men from the time of Noah. Men from the time of moving out of the jungle onto the Savannah of Africa have lived with the trauma of war.

No wonder at the end of First World War the men in the trenches wanted to believe there will be no more war.

Would I have wanted the young Ukrainian man who stayed the night to face what my grandfather

went through? And yet should Putin's soldiers be allowed to rape, destroy and pillage their way through the Ukraine?

Last week The Māori Choir read a poem that described the passive resistance of Parihaka. And the crimes of the settler government.

Wayne talked of the humanitarian work his son was involved in and the price he paid.

Wayne said we have the answer in Jesus. In our faith. And I waited for him to say more. Yes our faith is a comfort in times of distress. But has our faith got more to say?

Where do we find the answer?

Jesus talked about sorting sheep from goats. The sheep being those who provided for Jesus.
For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you invited me in,³⁶
I was naked and you clothed me,
I was sick and you looked after me,
I was in prison and you came to visit me.

This for me turns things in there head. So often in church and Christian circles we talk of taking Christ into hospitals, prisons, refugee camps, the fields of war. That is what we are told chaplains do! Is it not?

But what Jesus says here is quite different. He is saying he is in the prisoner, the sick, the naked, the hunger, and the thirsty. We do not take Jesus to these places, he is there already. We meet the divine in the other. We do not process the divine and take it with us.

In conflict we do not take our righteousness, our 'divine appointedness' into the situation. The divine, the Christ, Jesus is in the other person.

I might be stretching what Jesus is saying here. But if we are to take the attitude: 'In war it is in the enemy that we meet the divine' that we stop vilifying the other and instead we seek to see the Christ in them.

Especially in the foot soldiers.

Again, I go to my grandfather's memoirs. The day he was wounded he was able to walk back from the front line. There were wounded German prisoners of war walking back with him. He talked to one of them. The German had worked in London before the war. He had been called home to fight against the people he had been living with. They were two young men talking as they walked along the road. Two hours before they were trying to kill each other. Now they were in open conversation. No longer enemies. Experiencing the personhood in each other.
In the musical South Pacific there is the line in a song

'You have to be taught to hate and fear,
you have to be taught from year to year,
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You have to be carefully taught.'

On this the day after the armistice.
The end of the Great War.
The war to end all wars.
The day of both red poppies and white.
The day when we seek peace in a world again erupting into war.
A day when we seek peace.
A day when we know of great injustices that threaten peace.
Is this the day we need to look and see what we have been doing to young men for centuries.
Is it the time we stop and look and see the humanity of the other.
Of stopping and understanding what our tribe, our community, our nation has done to evoke hostilities.
Of stopping in order to right injustices. And seeing in the other the face, the face of the Divine.

We have so much history behind us. We have so much cultural heritage with us. Community stories. That can lead us to war.

We also have a deep primal drive to defend and protect our family tribe clan.

We need to work hard and consciously to overcome these forces and work for peace by seeing the divine in the other!

The Way of Jesus is not easy. But it is the way of peace where injustice has been addressed. Motivated by seeing the divine in the person in front of us.