

St George's Cathedral, Kingston
Sunday, November 11, 2018
Major the Reverend Canon Catherine Askew

I speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One hundred years ago the guns fell silent. Up until the last seconds the guns still fired, the artillery shells were still loaded and crashed in with horrific effect. Up until the last moments, men still died and would continue to die in the days and years afterwards from their physical and mental wounds. A Canadian, Pte George Price, would be the last Commonwealth soldier to die, killed by a sniper bullet at 10:58. One hundred years ago, men and women across many parts of the globe prayed that this would be it; that we had learned our lesson and this would be the war to end all wars. But as we know, it was not the end of war; the twentieth century became filled with wars, conflicts and horrors that had no precedence in their atrocity. Evil persisted. This is a teaching that is throughout scripture as well. But it is coupled with the belief that if evil persists that our duty as followers of our Lord is to resist and push back against the tide of evil with our continual efforts to bring about the kingdom, to bring good, no matter how small those efforts might seem.

In our readings today, a group that is often left to the side and unnamed in scripture, is brought to the forefront and highlighted. Throughout the Bible, women are often unmentioned, unnamed, and their fate is left as a mystery. Yet they are one half of the story of God's relationship with humanity. We are left largely invisible. So when a woman's story shines through and survives through the ages and is accepted into the canon of scripture, I give thanks that we are able to hear the faith and actions of these women.

In our Gospel reading, we meet one of these nameless women. She is a widow. As you likely know, in those days and until very recently, a woman's status in society was defined by her relationship to a man. We can tell a few things about this woman from the few words that are used to refer to her and from the social norms of the time. This woman had been married and her husband was dead. She is impoverished so she either had no sons at all or sons who are too young to earn a living. If she had sons who were providing for her, she likely would have been referred to as their mother, rather than as a widow. Daughters would make no difference in her status. She came to the treasury that day, marked as a widow, with no man to provide for her, and she gave all that she had, even though it was a pittance in comparison to the riches that others were giving. And Jesus saw her and recognized the enormity of her action rather than the insignificance of the amount.

This morning in Ottawa, there are thousands of other people standing downtown at the National War Memorial. I am sure that they are standing there with their feet freezing, their noses sniffing, and trying to stay warm as they all stand in place for nearly two hours. On this Remembrance Day, as there has been for many years, a Silver Cross Mother is standing in line with the dignitaries directly in front of the tomb of the unknown soldier with the massive Memorial directly behind. This Silver Cross Mother, Ms. Anita Cenerini, is different from past years. Her son, Pte Thomas Welch, did not die in combat. He deployed to Afghanistan in the summer of 2003 as part of Operation Athena Roto 0, which was the same deployment in which I served at the support base at Camp Mirage. He was part of the first large contingent of Canadians into Kabul, a city that had once been glorious with tree lined streets and palaces on the hills. By the time Thomas landed on the ground with nearly 2,000 other troops, Kabul was a drought ridden shell of a city and the palaces lay in ruins. The city stank of garbage and excrement

and helping the country seemed a monumental task. Pte Welch returned home from his six month deployment in early 2004 but three months later committed suicide. His death was the first known suicide related to the mission in Afghanistan.

I listened to Ms. Cenerini tell the story of her son this week on CBC Radio. It was heartbreaking to hear her voice wavering as she bravely related the decline of her son's mental health and her helplessness. She spoke of the changes the family saw in Thomas when he came home for his mid-tour break and his insistence that no Christmas gifts be sent. That he wanted nothing. She spoke of when his friend was killed and he called home and used his entire phone time allowance to try to talk through his confusion and feelings. And she spoke of when he came home and she could not help him, and could not connect, and ultimately, that he killed himself. Ms. Cenerini in that interview, gave all that she had and poured herself out as a witness to the evil of war and conflict. Her deposit into the treasury was to honour her son's memory and to speak about what for many years has been unspeakable and shameful. For many years, her son's sacrifice would have been seen as next to nothing compared to the deaths in combat. But to not speak about this part of war is to perpetuate an evil. We do not send machines into war that break down and can be fixed with wrenches and new parts. We send living people into war. We send young people who are filled with hope for a better world, who are filled with loyalty, and who hope to come home to family and friends and all the things they love.

War has never been pretty. War and conflict are bloody, messy, horrific affairs in which political powers might claim some victory but in which the average population often finds themselves shattered on both sides of the conflict.

One hundred years after the Armistice, we ask ourselves, what does it mean to remember something to which no one living was personally

witness? I hear and read about some people discussing the meaning of Remembrance Day, asking why we are glorifying war, why we are spending time remembering battles from so long ago. People who want to wear white poppies for peace because they see the red poppies and think only of death and destruction. I think people miss the point of Remembrance Day when these questions are posed.

On this day, I remember young men who were in school or labouring in fields or apprenticing when the shots rang out in Sarajevo. I remember their simple hopes for a good job, a happy wife and children, hopes that were dropped into the treasury box like the copper coins of the widow. Small simple hopes that were all that they had but were sacrificed for the love of their country and the hope of a better future for all.

I remember Pte Welch who joined the Canadian Forces as part of a dream. Who did his workup training with the rest of the regiment and was excited to deploy. Who saw his world crumbling in front of him as the days of deployment dragged on. Who sacrificed every last shred of his mental health to get through the deployment and had nothing left to get him through life. I remember you, Thomas. Canada remembers you.

The hundredth anniversary of the end of World War One is not a time for us to look back and just think of the glorious battles and the victories won. To do this would be like the day that Jesus sat near the treasury and people were taking note of the deposits made by rich and well dressed citizens. Wars are made of people. Of soldiers at the front, of nurses and doctors treating wounds, of factory workers and administrative staff, of friends and families, of dreams and hopes and fears. These copper coins make up the soul of war, they are the bits of currency that represent the real lives of people.

As many of you know, the battle of Hill 70 was a pivotal battle for World War One, for the Canadian contingent, and for the development of

Canadian military leadership, yet like a rocky outcrop near sandy soil, the winds of time nearly obscured it from collective memory. We do a disservice to the men who fought and died there when we forget them. We do a disservice to ourselves when we forget our foundation, when we look back and only see the shifting sand and do not believe that anything is beneath.

The foundation of our faith is much like this forgotten battle in this modern world. The detritus of modernity covers up that strong foundation of faith, leadership, and sacrifice and litters it with fake news, social media, and mass consumerism. For centuries, the faithful have been called to look to the rock from which we were hewn, and to the quarry from which we were dug. We are called to remember our beginnings, to dig deeper than the shallow values of this age, to build on solid rock. The challenge in this time is that the inflated appearance of some modern distractions causes some to believe that they are rocks upon which one can build. They are not. Our call from the scriptures is to dig around the huge constructions of society and discover the truth underneath and to sweep aside the dust and remember the rock upon which we truly stand.

Our call to duty today is to remember. Remember deeper than the battles won and the medals awarded. Remember the copper coins of the widow and when we gave all we had and beyond. Remember Pte Price, killed two minutes before the guns fell silent. Remember Pte Welch who killed himself to stop an anguish that he could not overcome. Remember all the men and women and families who gave everything in war and whose names have been lost to time and recognition. Remember.

Lest we forget.