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a state of readiness

It is good to remember, important to remember, necessary to remember. For if we forget, not only do we do a disservice to our past and the memory of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice, but we run the risk of endangering our future.

A WHILE BACK, I had an intriguing conversation with a friend of mine who had just returned from Europe. His trip however, was what one could hardly call a holiday. He had volunteered to serve on an United Nations Truth Project and was sent to Kosovo where this eminent pathologist was tasked to perform a large number of autopsies over a short period of time. In medical circles, he is a well known and respected physician, but I knew him as Bernard, the man whose father had



served in the Second World War, much of it in a prisoner of war camp, and whose health to this day is still impacted by that painful experience.

Bernard sees his role with the U.N. as important. He volunteered his time and expertise, in his words, “to give the dead a voice.”

“We must listen to the voices of those who have died,” he said. Autopsies determining causes and to some degree circumstances around death can help us understand some of the atrocities of life and perhaps, if we are able to understand, we can take the steps necessary to ensure that they never happen again.

Officially, today is Remembrance Day. We are honoured today to have many of our veterans greeting, ushering and worshipping with us. A number are wearing their medals, symbols of sacrifice and service in the name of God, Country and for the cause of peace. Others have marched past our building in the Remembrance Day Veterans Parade.

As a vet, Mr Bob Garden, along with his grandson Rob laid the Memorial wreath, and as Ian Stock reminded us of the young people who have died in recent months in Afghanistan, we are again made mindful of the who’s and why’s of war. These men and women served not only for the people of their day but for generations to come, so that all who follow might know peace. Yes, it is good to remember, important to remember, necessary to remember for, if we forget, not only do we do a disservice to our past and the memory of those who payed

the ultimate sacrifice, but we run the risk of endangering our future. They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old. We will remember.

Bernard’s words have remained with me and I often wonder what those who died in the wars of the past 73 years would say to us today? What would they say about how we remember, about what we remember? What would they say about the Canadian military, the war against terrorism, our troops in Afghanistan, or the ribbons which people wear and which are deckled on many public vehicles encouraging us to support our troops? What would the voices from the grave cry out us?

Each year, I have a Remembrance Day ritual. I pull down a book from my shelf entitled, “Our Heros in the Great War,” published by the Patriotic Publishing Company in 1919. In its more than three hundred pages, with 20 pictures to a page. It shows the faces of the men and women from the Ottawa area who served in World War One. Below each picture is a short caption, name, rank, dates of enlistment and then such words as “went overseas, served in France, served in England, twice wounded, wounded and gassed, killed in action, killed in action, killed in action.” Among them, although he survived, is my grandfather.

These pictures didn’t give me any answers or voices from the past, but they give me faces. They reminded me, they remind us that, for the most part, war is a young person’s plight. People in their late teens and



early 20's donned and don the uniforms in the name of God and country. Just a few weeks ago, I officiated at a wedding here in this church and, as we had premarital conversations, one of the things that we talked about was what life would be like for this new married couple when the groom goes to Afghanistan in August. A little more than a week ago I conducted the funeral of one whom, among the descriptions of his life, was called a 'boy soldier'. He was one of the many who lied about his age so that he might enlist in the Second World War. Such events make me wonder if these young people spent a lot time philosophizing about the perils of war. That is what we, who are not called to the front lines, have the luxury of doing.

They did their job, their duty whether that was in times of global warfare, civil war or pockets of resistance. Our freedom depended upon it. The survival of our globe depends upon it. Lest we forget. Lest we forget.

Yet, I imagine that if these young people were asked to paraphrase the passage from the book of Micah . . . swords into ploughshares, from the depths of their experience, many would say . . . I'd rather be farming, spears into pruning hooks, I'd rather be fishing than having to learn of war anymore. Today we acknowledge that sometimes war may be just. Sometimes war may be necessary, but war is never good. We are not called to remember the wars today. It is not the battles or the victories. Rather it is those

young men and women who could not grow old as we who are left grow old. It is the faces of the young people in my book or the families that have gathered at CFB Trenton as their loved ones are returned to their home soil.

Our New Testament lesson is a familiar story of Jesus commonly called the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. It describes a typical wedding which took place in Jesus' day. It did not occur on the date and time printed in the wedding invitation, but when the groom had met all the demands and conditions of the potential father-in-law. In this story, it appears the groom was a little tardy in fulfilling his obligations and, as a result, as the guests waited for the call . . . It's time, it's time. Ten bridesmaids waited with lamps in hand for the day had past and evening had encroached upon them. As more time passed, five ran low of fuel and since the law forbade people from being out at night without a lantern, they scurried home to get some more. When they were gone however, the time came, the five who were prepared joined in the festivities while the other five were locked out. Jesus concluded "keep awake therefore for you do not know the day or hour." Keep awake, be prepared!

Some ask, "How do we prepare for war?" How do we prepare for peace? Some might say we must build deterrents . . . larger armies, bigger bombs, more ships and planes. Perhaps there is truth to that. I remember as a boy a bigger kid beat me up so I got my brother who was bigger than he to



a state of readiness

beat him up! Sometimes ‘might’ might be a deterrent. I really don’t know and I guess we will have to leave that to the military strategists. However, do not many nations have stockpiles of weaponry that could annihilate our planet already? Might we also need to look at other ways . . . not so much to prepare for war as to rebuild for peace? This is the question which comes to my mind as I see in the pictures in my book, in the faces of the vets who are here today and in the hopes of our children and our grandchildren is “how do we maintain peace?” Isn’t that what they fought for died for? Indeed is not this peace what Jesus dies for?

Perhaps we prepare for peace by re-tooling society. This is what Micah was talking about . . . swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks, using technology to feed the hungry. Can this globe ever truly be at peace as long as there are those suffering through the ravages of hunger, malnutrition, starvation? A global concern, perhaps, but also a challenge, a challenge to eat a little less, to give a little more, to sponsor a child overseas, to fill a shoe box, to help out with a Christmas basket for a family at home . . . to give grain and fish instead of guns and ammunition. I recall being in El Salvador during their civil war. As we visited the capasinos, the farmers earning far less than a dollar a day to survive, we were told the military expenditure for that tiny nation was one million dollars a day. Can there be peace if we live with a mentality of war?

I have heard our military say that some of

their greatest joy and peace efforts were in the re-building of schools, in the construction of hospitals, in allowing those torn apart by conflict gain a renewed sense of dignity.

We prepare for a world of peace by removing inequality. Some of you have heard or read about a Mission and Awareness trip to Cuba during the March break when 14 local youth and four adult leaders, including the Rev Ross Lockhart of St. Matthew’s and myself. The purpose of the trip is not to build houses or teach the people of that tiny country all that we know, to re-live the Cuban missile crisis or support the trade sanctions of the United States. Rather simply put, it is to remove the them-us altitudes, to have Canadian youth interact with Cuban youth, to live, in a very real way Jesus’ command to love our neighbour and to recognize who are neighbours really are. A colleague in ministry Cuban pastor, Ruimundo Garcia, speaking of his people, said to me, ‘We always must be willing to listen to those who little or no voice, the voice of the poor and the children, of the elderly and the hungry for in their voices, we can start to hear the voice of justice.’

That was Bernard’s mission in Kosovo, giving voice to those who died there in times of war. It is the voice of the families in the 71 repatriation services, the voices of the young men and women who have served and continue to serve our country . . . that we might study war no more.

Remembrance Day. It is a day to look back and to give thanks for the men and



a state of readiness

woman who made this country Canada ‘the true North strong and free.’ To our vets, we thank you, we honour you, we express our gratitude to you for we cannot even imagine what this life might be like without your willing to sacrifice.

To those who shall not grow old as we who are left grow old we lift up,
your names,
your faces,
and at the going down of the sun, and in the morning,
we remember.

And to the young of our day, we pass the torch, a torch which burns for peace at home and abroad, a touch which burns for justice and equality, a touch which burns with hope for the future.

This is not a perfect world and we do not know the future but we do know that the voices of the dead cry out to us. There is nothing good about war and there is nothing bad about peace. Let this be our state of readiness. Let this be our goal. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with us.

Biblical References

Micah 4:1-3

Matthew 25:1-13

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