

Why Remember?

I speak to you in the name of He who Is, who Was and who is Yet to come. PBS

This is the homily I was born to preach.

You see I come from a proud line of military men. My Father, Eric Brennan served Britain in both Cyprus and Egypt in the 1950's and was one of the last soldiers who left Egypt when the Suez Canal was returned to the Egyptian people.

My Uncle, George Ernest Mitchelson, or Uncle Ernie to me, had a dream to fly in the Royal Air force. He was in tip top health when he enlisted and made it with ease through the physical testing, until it was discovered he was colour blind. That cut his flying career short, instead he was a P.E. Instructor for new recruits.

My Grand-dad George Ernest Mitchelson, my Mam's father, was in the Royal Air Force, Machine Gun Corps, 24th Battalion. He served from 1914-1920 and during a raid in Belgium he saved his unit from certain death when he awoke to the sound of a gas canister being thrown into the back of a transport vehicle. He grabbed the canister and threw it out, gassing himself badly. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his bravery and upon his recovery from the gassing returned to active duty.

Growing up I knew very little about my Grand-dad. He died 6 years before I was born and is buried at Mt. Pleasant Cemetery in London, Ontario. Once he retired he and my Nana came to Canada to see if they wanted to emigrate. He died before they could do so and thus, is buried there.

When my Grand-dad returned from the front he met and married Evelyn Ellis and they had three children together. My Mam, Mahalar being the youngest. Her older brother Ernie is the one who wanted to fly.

In the Old Testament Reading we hear the prophet Micah with the infamous phrase "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not rise against nation; they shall not learn war anymore." (Micah 4.3, NRSV) These words were written in the latter half of the 8th Century. They were written 1300 years ago and we STILL have not learned.

Such beautiful words..."they shall not learn war anymore".

The art of warfare is as old as time. Technology and societal advances mean that soldier no longer wear armour of hides, nor chain-mail, but Kevlar. They do not engage in hand to hand combat, waiting in ditches mere feet apart, but engage in battle over a screen using drones. Society and technology continue to advance, as does weaponry.

One thing that remains the same is the human cost. There is still chemical warfare as there was in my Grad-dad's time. There are still bullets and now there are so-called Smart Bombs. There are still innocent casualties, known as collateral damage.

The term "shell shock" was first coined in 1917 by Dr. Charles Myers. It was originally believed that neurosis was caused by the shells exploding too close to the soldiers. The disorder was believed to be primarily a moral defect, a kind of physical weakness and treatment was shaming, physical re-education and pain infliction. Electric shock was a popular treatment.

Today, this disorder is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. The term was first used in 1980. Doctors are continuing to learn the deep physical, psychiatric and spiritual pain caused by warfare.

Let me back up a bit.

Have you ever heard of the Christmas Eve Ceasefires during World War I? In Grade 10 history I heard a story about German and Allied Soldiers who, on Christmas Eve 1914 decided to declare a temporary ceasefire, which took place across the Western Front. It began as an uneasy silence. Then at almost the same time, the soldiers waved white flags and met on the area between the trenches; what was known as No Mans land.

With hand gestures, a smattering of the other's language and the universal language of laughter they shared photographs from home, cigarettes and brandy. In some cases a game of football (soccer) broke out and for those precious few hours, those mortal enemies became comrades in arms. They shook hands, exchanged greetings and in some cases, took the opportunity to bury their respective dead who had fallen in no man's land. And when the sun began to rise on the 25th of December 1914, they returned to their trenches and resumed warfare.

The ceasefire was never officially sanctioned, and unfortunately, never repeated.

In the gospel for today we hear Jesus implore his followers, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. (John 15.9, NRSV) and "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends". (John 15.12-13, NRSV)

Jesus knows that in order to fully received God's love we must be willing to die to ourselves; to die to our ego. We must be willing to sacrifice ourselves to fully understand the sacrifice Jesus made for us. We must be willing to die to our own selves in order to live for others; through this we show our love of God and of each other.

When I graduated from University in 1991 the Gulf War was coming to an end. I had watched, intently, the news reports and decided that I wanted to serve my country. So I marched myself down to the recruiting office in Sudbury, Ontario and presented myself with a brand-new Honours Bachelor of Arts.

The recruiting officer was very kind. The exchange went something like this. "Hello, my name is Andrea and I just graduated from University. I want to serve my country. Can you put me to work?" He smiled. "What kind of work are you interested in?" He asked.

"Stretcher bearer" I replied. He didn't laugh at me. "Do you have an FAC?" he asked. Seeing the puzzled look on my face he said "Firearms Acquisition Certificate". I shook my head. "Okay", he said, "we don't actually have stretcher bearers anymore."

Before we go any further, I need you to get this form completed by your family doctor and I need you to take a written test. Do you have time for that today?"

"Yes!" I answered, feeling my adrenaline flowing. He took me into the back and had me write a test, answering many multiple choice questions and a few essay questions. It took me quite a while to complete the test as I kept thinking and pondering and ruminating on the answers. By the time I finished he was relieved and he handed me the form for my doctor he said "when you get this finished, come back and see me and we'll discuss the results of this test." He then shook my hand and I headed home.

Now, taking the physical test was not so difficult, I weighed about 60 lbs less, and yet I failed the hearing part of the test. The doctor seemed to think I may still be of use in an office somewhere, that I would still be able to serve my country. So I went back to the Recruiting office and saw the same gentleman. He took me in the back and before I could show him the results of the physical test he said, with a straight face "you took longer than anyone has ever taken to complete the test".

"Is that good?" I asked. "Um, no." He replied. "You did not pass the test, it was a psychological test. You think, well, overthink far too much".

"Oh", I said, my face falling. "I have more good news...I also failed the physical...my hearing is not great". Are there any administration jobs I could do?" I asked.

He clasped his hands together in front of him and put them on the desk. "Andrea", he said, "while I admire your enthusiasm, I don't think you'd make a very good soldier".

"I want to serve my country" I cried.

"Which is commendable" he said, "but there are other ways to serve that do not include combat or military life". "Maybe you could volunteer with the Legion".

He shook my hand again and I left, feeling defeated.

It is worth noting, I had been a member of the Legion for two years, since I was 19. I then volunteered to be a member of the Executive and have been involved in the Legion in one way or another, since. I am proudly the Chaplain to the Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 36 in Fernie.

How many of you have military service? Would you please stand?

[Go and shake the hands of very military service person present]

Thank you for serving your country. Thank you for heeding the call to service.

Remember that story I told you about earlier? The Germans and Allied soldiers participating in an unofficial ceasefire? I had learned of this story when I was taking history in high school and we were studying world conflict; specifically World War I.

I remember speaking to my Mam about this story and she told me that her father, my Grad-dad was one of the British soldiers who participated in a Christmas Eve Ceasefire in

1914. I was astonished that this story was not only true; it was personal.

At this time of year, especially I think of my Grand-dad who went to war to defend his country. He answered a call to service, as did many of the men and women who defended their country in the trenches and in the factories back home.

My mother does not remember her Father as a healthy, active man. He suffered with neurological issues from the gassing and psychological issues from the shell-shock. When my Mam was 3 the Second World War began. She was 9 when it ended. Her father had a job as a civilian watch-keeper. During an Air Raid he would go out wearing a tin hat and carrying a torch (flashlight) to check that all was well. When the All Clear was sounded he would go out again.

My Uncle Ernie and my Dad were too young to enlist in the Second World War yet both were called up for active service. My Uncle at the age of 18, and my Dad at the age of 21. They both served their country; Uncle Ernie from England and my Dad in Cyprus and Egypt.

As an ironic twist of fate, my brother David is a pilot. He has no desire to join the military, his service is through the Legion.

Today we gather to mark two minutes of silence to remember those who laid down their lives for freedom and truth. They answered the call of their country; and the call of their God to serve. Many died in battle or from wounds inflicted in battle. Many more came home forever damaged by what they saw, heard and experienced.

The prophets Micah, Joel and Isaiah speak of swords and ploughshares; spears and pruning hooks. They implore God that nation shall not rise against nation. And here we are 13 centuries later and STILL going to war. STILL defending the rights of those who need it; not for personal gain. For sacrifice. For love.

We gather; not to glorify war, but to remember: that we may not make the same mistakes again.

When we gather tomorrow at the Cenotaph, may we remember those who died in battle; who died from their wounds; who came home damaged. Let us remember those young men and women who continue to sacrifice themselves for this country of ours. Let us pray for those who come home broken, that we may find a way to return them to wholeness. That we may find ways to treat PTSD so that no soldier ever has to suffer again.

Fighting for peace is like shouting for silence. It's an oxymoron.

Instead of fighting for peace, let us live in peace.

Let us choose love over hatred; peace over war.

Let us live our lives in hope, love and peace. Let us dear God, find another way to end war and hatred. By our examples may the world choose life, choose love, choose peace.

Reverend Andrea Brennan, Pastor
Christ Church Anglican, Knox United Church
Fernie, BC
Remembrance Sunday – 10 November 2019
Micah 4.1-5 Psalm 127
Hebrews 9.24-38 John 15.9-15