

Sermon: A day of Remembrance

I want to offer up a few thoughts on the passage from Luke before moving on to discussing the importance of Remembrance Day. This passage about resurrection and marriage can be a touch confusing or perplexing. What is Jesus saying about marriage? What is Jesus saying about relationships in the resurrection?

This passage where Jesus explains that those in the age of resurrection are like angels and cannot die, can be used in our service today to offer hope and assurance that the suffering and death experienced on earth are not the final story. The passage reminds worshippers that God is not a God of the dead, but of the living, and that for those who have died, their existence is transformed into something eternal and joyful.

It also helps to know a little about the Sadducees and their relationship to the Pharisees to appreciate what is going on here. The Sadducees were a branch of Judaism at the time of Jesus who were very temple focused with their theology around the relationship between God and the people of Israel.

They also didn't believe in the idea of resurrection. The Sadducees in question seem to be engaged in a form of debate that involves posing an absurd hypothetical situation to trap Jesus into a position that will essentially embarrass him and the Pharisees who also believe in the resurrection.

And that brings us to the system or tradition of what is referred to as Levirate Marriage which is being used here to question resurrection.

In this type of marriage, a man has a responsibility to his brother to ensure his memory in the community is preserved, through the continuation of his lineage. So if a man dies before securing an heir, his brother will marry the man's widow to ensure a son is born.

The ultimate question of the Sadducees might be put as, 'who does the woman belong to when all are resurrected?'

The premise of this question is that all shall remain the same in the next world. Resurrection involves restoring all to the way it was before. Jesus rejects that premise.

We belong to God. We are connected to God. That does not reject intimate relationships with those we love. But we are not possessions of another to be kept in that bondage in a new life.

But if I am fixing my attention on remembrance; and Remembrance Day this morning, where do I go from here? And I must confess that for all the problematic presumptions of Levirate Marriage and the role it assigns to half the population, commitment to preserving the memory of one's brother is where I want to focus this morning.

There is a communal responsibility to honour the memory and lineage of a sibling.

Yes, this tradition is very patriarchal and reduces women to their ability to provide an heir. But I am drawn to the idea that the community has a responsibility to the memory of those who have died.

In the same way, the Psalm we read this morning is fixed on the idea of remembering what we have endured, and how God has provided for us and strengthened us in our time of need. We are gifted with a memory. We are blessed by the ability to recall what we have endured and what we have received. And we are called to praise God and give thanks to God for those memories.

This Psalm essentially says, 'remember your history. Remember your story and hold on to it and hold on to God.' So, how do we remember? And why do we remember?

Today is Remembrance Sunday. It is the Sunday we take to commemorate Remembrance Day, which is set aside to remember and honour those who made a sacrifice for our country in armed conflict.

Now, on a personal note, I have no memory of most of the wars Canada has participated in. Years and generations of family separate me from the World Wars and from Korea. My experience, or lack thereof with war, is the same as a great many Canadians of my generation and younger.

But this is not only about personal experience. It's about community; about the country. This is about ensuring that we as a society do not forget what happened. We as a country decided it was crucial to go to war on different occasions.

We as a country decided we must send men and women into armed conflict in South Africa in 1900, in World War 1, World War 2 and Korea. We chose to send soldiers to Afghanistan and to countless Peace Keeping operations over the decades.

These are decisions that cost people their lives. They resulted in injury and wounds; physical, mental and emotional. Those decisions, no matter what the merits, resulted in heartache and heartbreak for loved ones who remained at home. They resulted in incalculable loss for communities across our country.

I don't want to get into a discussion or debate over the reasons or the morality of the choice to go to war. I don't want to discuss whether the decision to go to war was necessary or if perhaps there was no real choice.

For me, the relevant part is our country found it necessary to call on its young men and women to go to war carrying our flag. To represent us. To kill for us and to die for us. That comes at a cost, and not just for those who served.

We have a responsibility as a community; as a people; to remember that. We have a duty to listen, to read and to recall the stories, the memories and to honour the experiences of those who served. And, if we care, if we truly want to honour those memories; to learn from those stories.

Now, here's a big question you might be asking right about now. Where is God in this sermon?

In the Psalm, we are called to thank God for God's constant presence. To thank God for the gift of memory. To remember that God is always there, guiding us and protecting us. To praise God and to remember that God stays with us; even when things seem their darkest. God gifts us with a memory and the ability to learn from our experiences.

May we commit ourselves once again to learn from the lessons so painfully earned by those whom we honour today. We are not condemned to repeat the experiences of our history.

That, I want to believe, is part of what Jesus is trying to teach us in the story of the woman who is widowed so many times. Part of the hope of resurrection is that we are born into something new.

Those whom we love are part of the resurrected world, but we are not bound to a world that has not changed. Part of the hope of resurrection is the promise of a new world where love and peace and justice are a priority. A world where human beings are not commodities to enrich or further the selfish interests of others.

The hope of the resurrection points us to a world where we are all recognized as beloved children of God; free to live our lives in the protective shelter of God's love in relationship with who we choose; not based on the rules established by law and tradition.

We remember who we lost. We remember what they endured in our name. And we honour those men and women who paid so heavy a cost.

But we have a duty to learn from those memories and to ask difficult questions before we make those same decisions in the future and ask this of people tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the day after that.

Because we live with the hope of a new world; a new life where such demands are not made of our friends, our families, our neighbours, or ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen