

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Sacrifice"  
Dr. J. Dent

November 8, 2009  
Remembrance Sunday

All of our lives we have been exposed to the Armistice Day or Remembrance Day ceremonies and each time we are expected to have some fresh recollection or new encounter with the material fact of our war dead. For most of us, we will not have personal memories of those listed during the service. But out of respect, we all look for the meaning in the midst of the tragedy, perhaps in a similar way to how we take in the news daily.

This year, what has struck me the most is not something I haven't heard before but rather something that goes to the heart of all our lives. It is sacrifice. The greatest love anyone has is to lay down their life for their friends, their nation, their sovereign, their world. This is paraphrasing what Jesus said to his friends before he died. We often link soldiers giving up their lives for the freedom we enjoy today in parallel to the Lord Himself giving up his life for all who would believe. And there is a connection there, but not the one I had expected.

What I've come to understand this year is that all of life depends on sacrifice, no matter what you believe about war and going to war, your life depends on sacrifice. I don't think this is controversial, I think it is simply another way to frame what we take for granted in life itself.

Our lives begin with the pleasure of our parents but it is the sacrifice of our mothers to the transition of their lives in pregnancy and the pain and suffering associated with giving birth. Their sacrifice becomes the beginning of our lives. And once we are born, all parents know something of what it takes in the sacrifice of sleep, or career, of leisure, and of selfishness to raise an infant. Some parents have children with health issues on top of this and experience the further sacrifice required of a child with physical, mental or other illnesses.

Our education at school and at home comes to us at the expense of those who have given their lives to the profession. Yes, they are remunerated by the government for this path, at least those in public schools, and yet they choose to spend time with us from the very early years into later childhood and adolescence into the university years. It is the commitment of our

teachers and day care workers, and professors who given themselves to us to educate us in this mysterious thing we find ourselves in called "life."

Our physical health requires us to eat. In order to eat what we need to live, we have to depend on the sacrifice of life to receive the sustenance that we do receive. The life of many animals goes into our regular diet. And unlike the Old Testament times of animal sacrifice where there would be a placing of our hands on the animals head, and the animal dying taking the sin off of us and onto the animal as it died, we simply go to the supermarket and pick up what we want to eat neatly wrapped in Styrofoam and plastic. Unless we grew up on a farm where the regular slaughter of animals happens, we simply don't have the experience of watching an animal lose its life for our sake. And so we forget the sacrifice on our behalf.

And lest anyone think that I am arguing for vegetarianism, those who eat only non animal products also depend on the sacrifice of the plants and tree parts to live. Life only survives where sacrifice takes place. I've never really seen it like this before.

So when we look at our Lord sacrificing himself for us, we have a right to be shocked. Because here is Jesus, God having become a human being, a young man in the prime of his life, who dies a horrible death to begin a new life for us all. Yet it is in line with the rest of life happening by sacrifice. In fact, He is the fulfillment and finishing of the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. It is as Hebrews 9:26 plainly states, "Jesus has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself."

That sacrifice motivates us to recall our lives and wonder anew at the greatness of God's love for us, and motivates us anew to consider our own lives in terms of the sacrifices we have received to make our lives what they are. We are, what people have given, so that we may be.

This then brings us back to Remembrance Day to the place where we hear the loss of those men and seek to honour what they did even though we may not really know at all what they did. But whatever it was, it cost them their lives. And those who have served do know in some measure what that means for them. Only God really knows.

And only God really knows how much sacrifice has taken place in each of our lives, or more specifically the lives around us, to even be able to have

the life we currently have. Jesus also reflected on the loss of life of a grain of wheat. In so doing, he noted that unless this loss of life were to come about, no multiplication of the life of that grain would ever happen. But once it does happen, that life can be multiplied in surprising ways.

Now we know that grain is just another grass, it doesn't last long and shouldn't be compared qualitatively or quantitatively with our own lives, yet Jesus compared a grain of wheat to his own life to make a point. Life depends on sacrifice, specifically on his own life sacrificed for us.

We don't know what exact difference those men's lives made to the war effort. We could debate what might have happened if WWII were lost, for example. If Hitler had developed the atom bomb, and if he had achieved his third reich. But of the potentialities of what could have happened, we do know one thing that did happen. These young men gave themselves for their sovereign and their nation and whatever other reasons they had, and their life in this life was cut short. We receive the benefit of their sacrifice along with countless others this day, across Newfoundland and Labrador, across Canada, across the face of the earth and all nations who mark the millions lost in the World Wars and since then in the many wars in the last fifty years.

We can't really even imagine the amount of loss and sacrifice on our behalf that has gone in our lives personally, then surely how much more difficult it is to imagine the loss of sacrifice on behalf of our nation, our province, our city. But there it is.

Once we recognize such sacrifice, what are we to do?

Simply be thankful. We direct our thanks to the One who is the Author of Life.

Let us do so at this time.

Let us pray.