

Sermon – Cathedral of the Incarnation Memorial Day Sunday – May 29

Our gospel reading this morning from Luke's account of the good news is one of a number of stories that teach us about Jesus and his interaction with the world, through his interaction with individuals. Luke tells us that Jesus was entering Capernaum, a lovely lakeside town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, after a series of teaching moments with the crowds that followed him.

Whenever Jesus moved around from place to place he did so, not with great fanfare as the Roman army leaders did, but still with great energy from the crowds that followed him. As he entered Capernaum we hear that this energy alerted a certain Roman Centurion to Jesus' arrival. Luke's motivation is always to give a historic account of Jesus' ministry and in his details we can form a really good picture of this man, who despite his background sought out this itinerant Jewish rabbi.

A Centurion was an important leader of the Roman army commanding a hundred soldiers. As a Roman army leader he was likely to have been quite religious but forbidden from joining the Jewish faith. It is clear though from Luke's telling that this man was very friendly with the Jewish elders of Capernaum, he seemed well respected by them and appears to have been very generous toward them, having built them a synagogue. He also appears to have had a heart of compassion. He sought healing for his "highly valued" slave who was very ill. We might also draw a conclusion that the centurion was simply out to protect his assets as replacing a slave would be costly. However, all the other information about his character leads me to think the former might be truer.

The Jewish elders respected the man enough to become his intercessors in seeking out Jesus. The plea must have been heartfelt as it had a significant impact on Jesus who started off on a journey to the Centurion's house. As Jesus was making his way the Centurion seems to have become increasingly uneasy about meeting Jesus. Maybe he didn't want to be rejected by Jesus, a Jew who would be defiled by entering into a gentile's house. Whatever was going through his mind he was clearly humbled by Jesus' willingness to attend to his request. Feeling unworthy he sent friends to stop Jesus, telling him just to say the words to heal his slave.

Incredibly the centurion understands that Jesus can heal by word and thought alone, in a way that this man understands his own authority to direct his soldiers. He demonstrates complete faith that this Jewish Rabbi could heal his slave without ever seeing or touching him.

In a way this is our own story of faith and healing. This story was so important and it was remembered in such a way that Luke felt it important to write down in his account of the life of Jesus. As we read it today we are connected to the centurion and the slave through storytelling and memory. These stories are the memorialization of key moments in Jesus ministry that shape our own lives today, and have shaped countless lives over time.

We can learn something from each of these stories as we hear and connect to the characters and more importantly to the message. We learn something about the

individuals and the peoples and their reactions, emotions and faith responses. In our reading from 1 Kings this morning we have another wonderful story about faith and Elijah's courageous encounter with the prophets of Baal. I feel that often when we contemplate history we stay way up high above the details of the events we are reading about. But history after all is largely about the actions of many individuals, sometimes acting alone, sometimes acting in concert. Our bible stories would be less transformative in our own day if they just spoke in generalities about the life and times of Jesus, rather than giving us personal insights into those lives that were transformed by their encounters with Jesus and their faith in following him.

The same is true I feel for how we experience other great events in human history. The two thousand odd years since Jesus' death is filled with amazing events of human endeavor and human calamity. The closer we are in time to the various events the more they resonate with us. The farther away from them in time the less they resonate with us.

Death and trial seem to be two aspects of our human story that touch us deeply. The death of Jesus Christ that we remember each and every time we participate in this Holy Eucharist, affects us if we let our hearts be open to the experience. However, we can also choose to forget. We can decide that the memory of trial and death is too painful to face or that we just don't care to remember.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, a day when we collectively as a nation, hopefully pause to remember those that have died in the service of this country and in the seemingly unending struggle for freedom. We remember the men and women who sacrificed their lives for causes that they deemed important enough to die for. I don't know what percentage of people in the country will actually stop to remember those that have died nor what percentage will just see tomorrow as a holiday and the start of the summer season. The further we are from the terrible events of war the less they resonate with us.

For those families though that have lost loved ones in war, or from the effects of war, the memory hardly dims because it is the personal story, the personal sense of loss and grief that keeps the flame of memory going. I have not personally known anyone that has died in war but that is not to say that I am not impacted by the knowledge of those that have died. During the recent wars in the Gulf I was heartbroken to read every day of the deaths of so many young men and women, and to see the pages of their photographs in the newspapers. What struck me was the ages of those that died. Young men and women from their late teens to early 30s, just starting out in life and dying for their country.

War seems to take the lives of our young people more than most. I know from reading the names and ages of those from Australia that died in WWI that most were teenage boys. Most thought the journey from Australia to Europe would be an adventure, only to find a nightmare awaited them. The nightmare of all wars terrorizes and traumatizes many, many people. The memory of the battles does not stay in the theater of the war but remains in the mind of those that were there and had to witness so much death and tragedy.

A couple of weeks ago I filled in for a priest at Grace Church Whitestone. After I gave my sermon and was exchanging peace with the congregation a woman came to me with tears in her eyes explaining that she had just buried her son the Thursday before. After the service we talked and she told me that her son was a veteran of Iraq. He had struggled to regain his life when we returned and despite the significant family support he had, he just wasn't able to adjust back to his old life. A week before I met her he killed himself. In the pain she was experiencing she was also able to recount his consideration for the family in how he took his life. That man and his struggle will stay with me forever. The memory of this young man, and all the others that die as a result of war, and all the families that carry the scars also, are on my heart and in my prayers this weekend.

We will soon share in the Eucharistic prayer that is a memorial to the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Lord. The participation each week signals our willingness to remember Jesus' death and the impact his life had on our world. We are who we are because we choose to remember his life and to be transformed by it. So we too can keep the memory of the fallen in our hearts and on our minds and be transformed by their deaths, by understanding their lives.

I would like to leave you with a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called "Decoration Day" which was the name used for this day before Memorial Day was adopted in the 1960s.

Decoration Day

Sleep, comrades, sleep and rest
On this Field of the Grounded Arms,
Where foes no more molest,
Nor sentry's shot alarms!

Ye have slept on the ground before,
And started to your feet
At the cannon's sudden roar,
Or the drum's redoubling beat.

But in this camp of Death
No sound your slumber breaks;
Here is no fevered breath,
No wound that bleeds and aches.

All is repose and peace,
Untrampled lies the sod;
The shouts of battle cease,
It is the Truce of God!

Rest, comrades, rest and sleep!
The thoughts of men shall be
As sentinels to keep
Your rest from danger free.

Your silent tents of green
We deck with fragrant flowers
Yours has the suffering been,
The memory shall be ours.