

Meditation: “Sacrifice”

For her day and in her culture she was an old woman. She was over 40. Her father and older brother were long since dead. Her husband too had died. She had neither son, nor son-in-law to provide for her. She was not young and desirable enough to attract a new husband – she was, after all, past her child-bearing years. Thank God she was an Israelite. If she had been one of the peoples who lived around them she would have been in deep despair, but, the Torah commanded the children of Israel to support the widow and the orphan alike. Their offerings to the temple were to, in part, support people in her position, a sort of social service program for first century Israel.

At least that was the common understanding of the Torah.

A denarius was a day’s wage. It was what it cost to feed, clothe, and house a small family for a day. She was all alone and did not need an entire denarius, but two small coins that together added up to only 1/64th of a denarius was too little to buy a piece of day-old bread to gnaw on. The offering that should have supported her, instead swished down the road on the back of a scribe. A real peacock, that one, she thought bitterly. She might just as well give her two coins to the temple treasury as cast them in the dust. After all, she couldn’t eat them. Perhaps they might be used to help someone else.

He was a young man in those days. A recent immigrant and all alone in a new country. He lacked much of an education and drifted from one low paying, back breaking job to another. One morning he awoke to the news that his newly adopted country, Canada, had declared war against Germany. There was a rush to sign up for the infantry, and he

was right there in the line, with many others, ready, willing and able to do what he could to fight for his country, ready for a paying job. After basic training, he shipped off to Europe, first to England, from whence he had recently come, and then to France. Ypres was a giant mud pit, criss-crossed with trenches, pitted with bomb craters, reeking of mud, and death, and rotting flesh, and gunpowder, and gas. The Canadian forces were poorly equipped, yet, when they arrived, the English started to flee. He had to try to keep the English in the trenches with his bayonet, and fire at the Germans too. And every time they launched a gas attack, he had to whip out his hanky, urinate on it, and cover his face to protect himself; he had no gas mask.

One dull afternoon, after a charge at enemy lines, many lay on the field moaning and crying out for help. His best friend was among them. After more than an hour of listening to his pleas, he decided to chance a rescue. Up, out of the trench he scrambled, across the field, weave around the bomb craters, still filled with mustard gas from earlier in the day. There he was, just ahead; then searing pain in his shoulder. He stumbled and slipped in the mud and fell into one of those gas filled craters.

He was young and bright, and he loved God with all of his heart and with all of his mind and with all of his strength and with all of his soul. It tore his heart to see the suffering of his peoples, even worse, it caused him great grief to see that they had drifted far from their relationship with God. He wanted nothing more than to heal them, body, mind, and spirit. He hoped and prayed and yearned that they would recognize their alienation from God, and would turn and recommit themselves to the living God who stood ignored in their midst. Things were not the way God had hoped they would be for the

people of Israel, for all people of the earth, or for creation itself. And so this young upstart broke bread with the so-called dregs of society. He healed the sick. He railed against the injustices of the spiritual leaders, who were out for anything and everything they could get: power, prestige, wealth. He taught them about God's love and God's yearning for them. In the end, he went too far, and the authorities convinced the Romans to nail him up on one of their hanging beams.

All three of these stories are about sacrifice: the sacrifice of a woman who gave all she had to the corrupt temple; the sacrifice of a man who risked life and limb for a fallen comrade, in the service of a government that lacked the imagination to solve its differences with others in some way other than resorting to violence; and the sacrifice of the Son of God who gave his life attempting to save a corrupt world. Sacrifice is not simply about dying, although it may be that. Sacrifice is not simply about giving something to God, although it may be that too. Sacrifice is about setting aside one's own agenda, one's own desires in seeking something of value to others, whether the other is a society, or a single person, or the entirety of humanity. Sacrifice is not simple. It does not ask that give what we can afford or what is convenient. It demands that we give what is difficult, what causes hardship, even what puts our life on the line. This is what the men and women that have served, and continue to serve the Canadian armed forces do every day. They risk life and limb in the service of our country.

Let me be the first to bemoan our country's, even our world's inability to solve our differences without resorting to the use of force and violence. At the root of it lie attitudes of entitlement and self-indulgence. If all people adopted an attitude of sacrificial living, if all

people were willing to set aside self-ambition, self-indulgence, self-interest for the sake of the benefit of their fellow human, and for the benefit of creation we would wake up and find ourselves living in the kingdom of God, here on earth. If we truly wish to honour the memory of our soldiers who offered up their lives in the pursuit of justice and peace, we would adopt the attitude of sacrifice that they adopted. In the meantime, we gather to remember their sacrifice; to remember their names.

Today I remember my grandfather, Ernest Very Perry, who survived a gunshot wound to the shoulder and a dousing in a crater filled with mustard gas, and who, after a year in hospital, returned to Canada, married and raised three children, one of whom was my father. It is a fact that his injury likely saved his life, for the rest of his company was sent to Passchendaele, where, to a man, they all died. God rest their souls, them and all who have died a violent death at the hands of another, throughout time, from Able, to this day and in the future. Amen.

