

Sunday November 9, 2025
Remembrance Sunday

Meditation: “Martinmas”

Every year I struggle with this service, and not just because the idea of honouring warriors doesn't jive with my image of God – The Prince of Peace. When I was serving my internship in Kitchener I was tasked with providing the Remembrance Sunday service. There were people in the congregation who had lost relatives on both sides of the Second World War – the Canadian and the German armed forces. It made me examine what the day is really about. Is it really about honouring our warriors who have died (and thereby glorifying war), or is it about remembering that violence, war and terrorism are a really objectionable way of resolving our differences, or could it be about both?

In just a few days the Christian calendar celebrates St. Martin of Tours, on November 11. Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier who converted to Christianity and in the Middle Ages ‘Martinmas’ was an important feast that marked the end of the harvest, the beginning of winter, and celebrated Martin's life, not as a warrior, but as a peacemaker.

I recently read an article, an excerpt of a book actually, that I want to share now. What follows comes from Diana Butler-Bass' book, *A People's History of Christianity*.

(an excerpt from [*A People's History of Christianity*](#))

“That's a beautiful window,” I said to my friend, an Episcopal priest, as he took me on a tour of the church building where he served, St. Martin-in-the-Fields in Philadelphia.

High on the wall, well above the entry doors in the neo-medieval building, a large round stained-glass window depicts a man, a soldier, sheltering another in his cloak. More than its execution, however, made it beautiful. The picture communicated caring, the two figures appeared to glow in the practice of hospitality.

“You know the story, I suppose,” the priest said. “That’s St. Martin. He converted to Christ while a soldier. One day, his regiment was guarding the city of Amiens and he met a naked beggar on the road. Martin, though only a catechumen and not yet a baptized Christian, took off his cloak, tore it in half, and covered the beggar. He literally followed Jesus’ teaching to give one’s coat to the poor.”

Looking up at the window, I remembered the rest of the legend as well. On the night of the cloak episode, Jesus appeared to Martin in a dream affirming the soldier’s act of hospitality, saying, “Martin, a simple catechumen covered me with this garment.”

The episode became stuff of gossip in the regiment, and the cape was rumored to have miraculous power. Eventually, Frankish kings turned the cloak into a relic claiming divine protection on their rule.

Martin of Tours (ca. 316-397) was born into a pagan family, but as a young man expressed interest in Christianity. His father, however, was appalled by the religion and forced Martin to join the Roman army. While serving as a soldier, Martin’s curiosity about Christianity grew, as did his strong sense of morality, until he became a catechumen, a “learner” of the Jesus way. While still an inquirer, the cloak episode supposedly occurred.

The cloak, of course, is most likely the stuff of pious legend, a story told to make a point. But the point was clear: Martin was devout, even before baptism, and followed the way of hospitality and sharing.

When he was baptized, Martin demonstrated yet another early Christian practice by asking to be released from the army. “I am Christ’s soldier,” he maintained, “I am not allowed to fight.”

Martin was not a conscientious objector in the modern sense, he was only stating early Christian practice. Before theologians Ambrose and Augustine made a case for just war, Christians were not allowed to fight. No record exists that Christians served in the Roman army before 170.

The strong consensus of the early church teachers was that war meant killing, killing was murder, and murder was wrong. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage noted: “The world is going mad in mutual bloodshed. And murder, which is considered a crime when people commit it singly, is transformed into a virtue when they do it en masse.” Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Origen all specifically condemned participation in war. “The Christian fathers of the first three centuries,” states theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill, “were generally adamant that discipleship requires close adherence to the nonviolent and countercultural example of Jesus’ own life and his sayings about the nature of the kingdom.”

Related to their horror of killing was a second problem about warfare: soldiers were required to perform acts of worship to the state, the gods, and the Emperor, thus, from a Christian perspective, soldiering demanded idolatry. Because the empire murdered Christians (among others), Tertullian pointed out that even a soldier’s tokens of victory, especially the crown of laurel leaf, were symbols of death, hollow triumphs made at the expense of other human beings: “Is the laurel of the triumph made of leaves, or of corpses? Is it adorned with ribbons, or with tombs? Is it bedewed with ointments, or with the tears of wives and mothers?” Since the military practiced both violence and idolatry, Tertullian insisted that there was “no agreement” between serving God and the Emperor. To even wear the uniform of a soldier symbolized killing; as a result, the church did not let Christians enlist or converts to continue to serve after baptism.

While Tertullian emphasized the negative aspects of the military to Christian discipleship, Origen pointed out the positive vision of a life of Christian peacemaking. He criticized the army as a society of “professional violence,”

pointing out that Jesus forbids any kind of violence or vengeance against another. “We will not raise arms against any other nation, we will not practice the art of war,” he wrote, “because through Jesus Christ we have become the children of peace.” To him, the spiritual life entailed a rejection of all forms of violence, an “absolute pacifism.”

In asking to leave the army, Martin followed the way of peacemaking, as taught, expected, and insisted upon by the early church. As soon as Martin was freed from military obligation, he studied theology with Hilary of Poitiers and became a monk. In 372, the city of Tours chose him as their bishop. Like John Chrysostom, he turned down the honor — only to be lured from hiding and forced into the office by popular acclaim.

He proved a popular bishop. He planted churches, converting many people throughout France, and founded the first Egyptian-style monastic community in the northern part of the Empire. Many people believed that the former soldier, once a member of the feared Roman army, possessed the gift of healing; they came to him for relief from illness and disease. And he served the poor, and outcasts, even on one occasion protesting the death penalty of a wrongly condemned man. Unlike so many of his peers, he died peacefully in bed, of old age, having dedicated himself to a nonviolent way.

(end of excerpt)

As Christians, followers of Christ, the Prince of Peace, we are called to a counter-cultural way of life. We are called to live lives that counter the cultural norms of society. When we think of the tragic loss of life due to war and violence, let us not glorify the warriors or war itself, rather, let us ponder the futility of war and let us imagine new ways of resolving disputes that do not involve the use of force or violence. Let us remember the future that Micah spoke of, when all people will

“go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that [God] may teach us [God’s] ways

and that we may walk in [new] paths.
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
[God] shall judge between many peoples
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid.”
May it be so.