

“Sacrifice”  
Ecclesiasticus 44:1-15; Hebrews 11:32-12:2  
May 26, 2019 (Memorial Day Sunday)

There are plenty of stories about war in the Bible, given especially the history of Israel, eternally beset on every side by deadly enemies such as Egypt and Assyria. Rioting and physical violence greeted the early Christians, as reported in the Book of Acts in the New Testament, whether in Greece, Rome, Asia Minor, or somewhere else. And who can forget the visions of John the Divine, who foresaw the great war to come at the end of the world, at Armageddon which is in northern Israel.

But these are, by and large, *descriptive* passages of scripture; much more rare are *prescriptive* teachings about physical conflict and violence - Christ’s phrase to “turn the other cheek” comes to mind, though he did not hesitate to wield a bullwhip in the Temple. Maybe that explains the inner disagreements and conflicts with the community of those who call ourselves the People of God toward the entire idea of war. For example, in many quarters of the church today it has become quite fashionable to espouse complete turn-the-other-cheek pacifism, no matter who the enemy, what the cause, or where Right may lie. Others in Christianity and Judaism and Islam hold to theories, developed hundreds of years ago by the Church and elsewhere, of the “just war,” which has been used not only by the Church, but also by politicians, to sanction wars against the Nazis of yesteryear as well as Saddam Husayn and others of more recent memory.

I cannot solve such dilemmas this morning in 15 minutes in the pulpit. However, on this Memorial Day Sunday I would like all of us to think about some of the issues involved in the hopes of clarifying some of our own individual thinking.

We must not lose sight that it is not human life which is the most important thing in the cosmos. Now, make no mistake: I do believe in the importance of human life, maybe because (rumor has it) I am somewhat human myself. But I am nagged by the belief that mortals are not the most important value in the universe, that there is something higher than humankind, that if Christianity is telling us anything, it is to put

Christ at the center of everything - not ourselves. We are not the end-all and be-all of the universe. We are not so important that all else is to be sacrificed to us and our own bodily survival. For did not Christ say that we are to deny self for the sake of others and for the sake of the Gospel? Does not scripture tell us that there is no greater love than that one should lay down one's life for one's friends? Does not the Apostle Paul tell us that we are to die to self and live to Christ?

Some of that might not sound pleasant, but there are many things about our faith that aren't pleasant, at least when you take the short-term view. Even Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup of death might pass from him. And we know what his Father's answer was...

Many non-Christians think that Christ was foolish to accept death. He could have run away, he could have deserted the cause, he could have fled across the border from the Kingdom of God to the Kingdom of this world. But Jesus did nothing of the kind, even though Muslims assert that Jesus never died at all, that the crucifixion never took place. But to the Christian mind, Jesus was called upon to sacrifice, and so he did - because he knew that there are some things more important than this life, that to live in the shame of having failed your sisters and brothers - and your God - is intolerable next to sacrifice for the greater cause.

This is a message that so many have missed, both now and in the past. So many value nothing but themselves, seeing little beyond *their* wants, *their* desires, *their* demands, *their* greed, *their* privileges, *their* concerns, *their* pettiness, *their* lusts, *their* foolishness. It is as if they had never heard the Ten Commandments which state right from the top "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." How easy it is to forget that it is God who is at the center of all, that it is God who gives life and who receives it back again, that it is God who gives human life meaning and shapes it; that it is God who stands at the center and binds all else together. Do we dare replace God with our own selves?

This weekend is the time when we salute many who said, “No. There *are* some things more grand, more valuable, more important, than who or what I am.” And when the chips were down, they put themselves in mortal danger, some never to see home again.

There have been a number of shifts in our national culture of late; one of the better ones is that we now thank those who serve militarily instead of treating them like pariahs as we did during the Vietnam era. In our haste to forget a difficult part of our history, we (at best) forgot those who were most caught up in its horrors. Even worse, in our forgetting, we have risked repeating our many mistakes.

That is why Memorial Day must be observed, must be celebrated, must be remembered. Some feel that holidays like this glorify conflict, and so are best left unmarked. How short sighted a view to have, both with regard to our past, as well as to our future. Because if we do not remember, we will probably only end up having to relive our trials, re-sacrificing ourselves or our loved ones once again to retain those freedoms which so many so blithely take for granted.

There is a legend among the English-speaking peoples that time cannot erase from our collective memory. It is the story of King Arthur and the Round Table. I won't bother to repeat the tale here, even in outline, except to remind us that King Arthur, in the end, was defeated. We do not celebrate him and his memory because he was a success, or because he triumphed. All that he fought for was lost in a sea of barbarism and darkness.

But in a sense, Arthur won. Why? Because despite being a loser (as some who are less than charitable might characterize him today), he is still remembered. The ideals for which he stood and fought are not forgotten. They live on beyond him, for what is really important is not his life, just as what is not important is whether we are a success in everything we do in our own lives. It is, rather, that we remember - remember who we

are, Who called us, Who gives us meaning, Who gives us life, and what makes life itself worth living.

Some One else failed many centuries ago, even before King Arthur went down to defeat. It happened on what was to be called Good Friday. His teachings were rejected, His followers abandoned Him, and His life was forfeit. But did Christ fail? Our presence here this morning is evidence that He did not. For we acknowledge, as God's people, that Christ knew there was something worth fighting for, something greater than a little kingdom like Arthur's, or an individual's life, even if that life belonged to a humble carpenter from Galilee. What is important is that they fought the good fight, and left the outcome in the hands of a God Who sets all things aright, Who refines, purifies, and cleanses. May we be worthy of those who came and have gone before us, to follow in those footsteps of sacrifice and self-denial for the greater glory of the Kingdom.

Let us pray: