

Pentecost 10
9/8/2009

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-15

Psalm 130

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

Sermon preached by Rev. Wes Campbell

Silence.

There is nothing so silent as an old, black and white photograph of the First World War.

That struck me quite forcibly last week in Bendigo art gallery. There, on display, were photos from 1916 to 1919, of Australian soldiers at the Somme, the French front. In a story that rivals the Ern Malley affair, when hoax poems were 'discovered', those photos came from negatives in an old cardboard box, carelessly stored and nearly burnt in a clean up.

The photos were taken by two Grinton brothers who survived the war and returned home with their cameras and their negatives. And, like so many returned Australian soldiers, they remained silent about them.

Staring silently out of these photos are young men, boys, really. I had expected to see photos more graphic, but the trenches and the graves are only just there: a couple of photos of crosses, groups of demobbed soldiers in Paris, some with walking sticks, a bombed church and village, are but silent hints of what these photos don't show or say.

Nothing is so silent, I have heard, than the battlefield following the noise of battle. The prophet Jeremiah describes such a scene with its dead, and say that even the birds have fled. (Jeremiah 4: 25:

*I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.)*

And so many who have experienced the war have lived on, unable to speak, the memories bricked over, consigned to silence.

The poets try to break the silence.

David Campbell writes: (The Somme)

*The skylark goes up
Like a flare over Pozieres
Where peasant women
In bright coloured skirts
Are hoeing our men in.*

[p. 92, *Shadows from the Wire: Poems and Photographs of Australians in the Great War*, ed. Geoff Page, Penguin, 1983]

Hoeing our dead men in.

It's echoed by Ivor Gurney (To His Love):

*He's gone, and all our plans are useless indeed.
We'll walk no more on Cotswold
Where the sheep feed
Quietly and take no heed...
His body was so quick...*

*You would not know him now...
But still he died
Notably, so cover him over
With violets of pride...
Cover him, cover him soon!
And with the thickset
Masses of memoried flowers –
hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget.*

(p.90 *The English Poets of the First World War*, John Lehmann, Thanos & Hudson, 1982)

Today, the Lectionary breaks the silence. Just.

Following the death of David's son Absalom, a rebel against the throne, killed by the thrust of blades, we are told:

'The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son, my son Absalom! Would I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam 18: 30)

And the psalm echoes the same: 'Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!' (Psalm 130)

Herbert Reed wrote in a similar vein, with a cry coming from the strange companionship that comes from shared battle:

*But God! I know that I shall stand
Someday in the loneliest wilderness,
Someday my heart will cry
For the soul that has been, but that now
Is scatter'd with the winds.
Deceased and devoid.*

*I know that I'll wander with a cry:
'O beautiful men, O men I loved,
O wither are you gone, my company?'*

King David cries out because he wanted his rebel son protected, but now must grieve his death; this is the king who won his throne in battle; who 'stood at the side of the gate, while all the army marched out by hundreds and by thousands.' (2 Sam. 18:4)

David, is a king, like all kings: who 'in the spring of the year, goes out to battle' (2 Samuel 11).

Benjamin Britten's War Requiem recalls the death of so many young men in Europe in the First World War, imagining the older men as Abram who is prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac:

*Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenched there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! and angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
Abram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so,
but slew his son, -
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.*

There is such anguish. The poets of the First World War tried to give voice to it; Wilfred Owen said:

"I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense conciliatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful."

There is so much bloody conflict in the story of David. He bears all the marks of monarchs of those times. As Samuel the prophet had warned the Jewish people who were hankering to look like other empires, and therefore wanted kings: the kings they get will make them pay tax, will take their daughters for their own pleasure, and will send their sons out to war.

[He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.' 1 Samuel 8:11-13]

Even with that stark warning, the people insisted on having a king – then Saul, followed by David, Solomon, and the whole line that followed, proceeded to do just as the prophet said. It's why the psalmist warns: Do not put your trust in princes and their chariots

*Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish. (Ps. 146)*

*Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.
They will collapse and fall,
but we shall rise and stand upright. (Psalm 20)*

It is true that the lectionary, in previous weeks has given us a glimpse of David's behaviour, in the affair with Bathsheba and the calculated murder of her husband, with the prophet's denunciation of the murderous, adulterer king.

And, along with his martial feats, a number of passages tell of David's wives, numerous concubines and young women, from which he breeds such rebellious sons. Even Solomon, so wise permitted to build the temple, bears all the marks of the rapacious monarch whose wealth is created out of the labour and bodies of their subjects.

It is remarkable that the national literature of Israel should contain such brutal honesty. Yet, it is also true that there are different voices in Scripture. The books of Chronicles do not give us such detail; omitting the rape of Tamar by her brother, David's first born, and silent about the murder of Uriah.

There are ways we try to deal with the silences. In the photographic exhibition in Bendigo, along with the photos are the medals awarded the soldiers: for heroic and brave acts. The citations seek to put honour into the mess of blood and mud.

And David is remembered as the greatest king of Israel, in the midst of all this bloodletting and anguished grief.

Why are we worried about the details of David?
Isn't it because as the church we are committed to caring about a descendent of David - of David's line?

So, we could simply forget the details, silence the messy, awkward and brutal past, and like the army in France, award honours.

But that will not do.
Especially because we are living under the cloud of such violence now.

On Thursday some of us stood on the concrete lawn of Melbourne University with placards remembering Hiroshima, Nagasaki, cities bombed into the nuclear age. We held a photograph of an atomic test in the Pacific: a small observer ship in the ocean, a small atoll, a great plume of water and a mushroom cloud: the black and white photograph hid the noise, the heat, the white flash. And the human agony.

The evaporating of two cities, with their radiation, belongs together with the Nazi death camps. You may also have looked at photographs of the piles of shoes, of hair, of the showers of gas, and the pits and emaciated bodies of the survivors.

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of those death camps, has pondered hard and long over the violence in the story of Israel, and in those death camps.

If anyone might have silenced the agony here, he could have done it. But, no. He refused to stay silent. And he interrogates the very texts which tell of the violence in the story of the Jews, the chosen people of God.

Why all this violence? Elie Wiesel, as I recall, says that God gives the people their head and does not prevent their brutality nor staunch the blood of their behaviour. Rather, God lets God's people take that violent path, in order that they might know the cost of violence, and will learn to be a people of peace. (I must make clear he is not blaming the Jewish people for the camps, or for that suffering. But he is looking at the same story we are reading, and finds in it – following the unspeakable horror of the twentieth century – a vocation for the people of God – as a people of peace.)

Will this help us, too? We who are members of the non-Jewish nations? We who are members of the church?

Facing the violent world, we are lured into thinking that we can do very little about the violence of kings and generals; we are lured into putting our cautious trust in princes and politicians, with their chariots, missiles and drones.

And, close to home, the events of the past week, with reports of terrorists in this city, have stirred up the dark fears within us: a darkness prepared for over centuries; where the difference of those who are dark-skinned, non-English, and practice other forms of prayer, fans the fear in us that they are a threat.

We can expect that those arrested will be imprisoned. Then they will no longer be on the front page of the paper, the first item of news. And then what will happen? Silence will fall and will cover them. Until the deep and dark fears within have use of them!

If that happens, we will not have listened to the things that have been spoken to us today.

We are here only because in Israel, a son of David went down into death with a forsaken cry.

And hearing his cry, his Father grieved: not king David, now, nor even Joseph, but the one he called Abba entered the agony with him, going with him even into the silence of death.

Then, against all odds, on that silent front, a whisper breaks. fanning hope, causing those in darkness to strain to see light:

*my soul waits for the Lord,
more than those who watch for the morning-
more than those who strain in the darkness to see the dawn.*

How can it be, that we who are so embedded in the systems of death and destruction can expect to live?

*If you, Lord, should punish our evil,
who could survive?*

Can we take the letter to the Ephesians at its word: that in one man who was nailed and pierced by the powers at work in our humanity, something new has happened? In his broken body a divided humanity is bound together, enemies reconciled. Those who were afraid of the stranger are now no longer driven by that fear. Rather, exposing the seriousness of our evil, he draws us into an experiment, where people who are different, sometimes pushed and torn by strong disagreement, do not take the path of battering violence, or (worse) turning away from each other in a deafening silence, but seek to live together, sing together, pray together and eat together, as we do here today. This is but a whisper of peace. But, note, even a whisper breaks the silence!

*O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem (Israel)
from all its evil.*

Take hold of this: Jesus has entered our mud and blood to rehabilitate us. He calls us to inhabit his body, to be intimately connected to each other! Not merely for our own benefit – but for the future of the world itself!

Be encouraged: this same Jesus Christ who broke our silence, promises to replace every cry of anguish with a shout of joy; and strangely, his very promise brings us to David's cry of grief, to the psalm's cry of anguish, prompting us to cry out in grief and agony for the world, for all victims of war, for all caught up in a web of fear, calling out to God, even as we trust that the God who knows evil, repays with forgiveness.

Therefore, as the apostle writes to the Ephesian congregation, be imitators of God, as beloved children and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.
(Ephesians 5: 1)

To this one Lord and Son, Jesus Christ, who saves us by his own body, be all praise, thanks and glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. AMEN
