

Pentecost 9
7/8/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Hebrews 11:1-11
Psalm 33
Luke 12:32-40

Of hearts and treasures

In a sentence:

People are never (properly) means to ends, but are an end in themselves.

This week a feature story in our newspapers was the apology of the Adelaide Crows football club to Eddie Betts and other players who were made to participate in a team training camp in early 2018. The occasion for the apology was a new autobiography by Betts, in which he describes the physical and psychological duress applied to the players in what was something like a military boot camp intended to turn the team into more effective sportsfield warriors.

Many important but mundane things about the camp could be observed, including the inappropriateness of subjecting what were, in some cases, little more than boys to such treatment, and how personal identity and confidential information were weaponised against individuals, and elements of indigenous culture were misused. The account of the camp is quite ghastly – or at least this seems to be what we are to conclude from the way in which it has been reported. “What were they thinking?” is a reasonable question to put to the club and the camp organisers, and the club’s apology reflects recognition of the problem.

Yet, if the reports do horrify us, they ought not surprise us, for there is nothing new here. By this, I don’t mean that the camp was an instance of similar things that occasionally happen. Rather, the unsurprising thing is the motivation for the camp. The methods used at the camp reflected the pervasive mindset that ends can justify means. In this case, winning was worth the risk to the hearts and minds of those who attended the camp: human beings were to be employed for ends other than those people themselves. De-humanising through abusive language and other psychological and physical methods was intended to re-cast in the players’ minds that their single purpose was winning the competition.

We trivialise what is at stake here if we judge the methods of the camp by dismissing football as “only a game” – that it was too much given what could be gained. This misses the point because the implication is that, were it not “only a game”, the methods might be justifiable. Here we can broaden what is at play in how we connect means and ends by observing that the camp was run that way *because such methods actually work* – or, at least, we hold that they do in certain contexts. We are familiar – as individuals, as a society and even as a church – with a justifying of means by ends, even if the means are a great human cost.

The quasi-military nature of the Crows’ training camp is significant here. In war, the hearts and bodies of soldiers are employed as a means to an end – winning the war. As a society, we celebrate the sacrifice these men and women make; that sacrifice is surely great, whether the soldiers make it willingly or unwillingly. But in this, we overlook that the nation also *expects* this sacrifice – that it effectively *sacrifices* those hearts and bodies. The human cost of war is the means to the end of winning the war. Not many months back, then Minister for Defence, Peter Dutton, warned that Australia needed to

shift to a war footing, given growing tensions around the Pacific. At the same time, a recent survey reported the general unwillingness of young Australians to commit themselves to fighting a war. This prompted Prime Minister Morrison to express his disappointment in our younger generations on that issue and to write an opinion piece explaining how the nation's defence depended upon people willing to enlist. Around all this has been a wider conversation about the reintroduction of national service – although seemingly only for young people. In a war, a nation consumes its young – apparently a justifiable means to the end of national security.

We know, of course, that the cost is horrific even if we are willing to pay it, and so annual remembrance services are sombre affairs. But it is the assumption that the cost of war must be paid which is the heart of the matter – the assumption that the end is important enough to justify means, whether the battlefield is the Adelaide Oval or the South China Sea.

We *do* distinguish between a footy match and geopolitical conflicts. This is principally in terms of scale: the Grand Final seems pretty trivial in contrast to national security. But we are a little confused here, because both seek to preserve a present or create a future and so both are about ends and means. And in both cases, the human means are clearly distinguishable from the end created, be it the Premiership or unassailed borders. Those human hearts and bodies matter less than the desired end. Footy *is* “only a game”, and so the methods of the Crows' training camp seem excessive. Yet we still hold to the sacrificial principle in other seemingly necessary contexts.

We want then, two contradictory truths to be true at the same time: on the one hand, that human hearts and bodies are not means to anyone's ends and, on the other hand, that sometimes we have to pile up a few bodies to divert history's juggernauts. This is a kind of hypocrisy – a “sincere” hypocrisy, perhaps, but no less hypocritical. We don't want to see that sometimes we agree that our hopes for history need to be lubricated by blood.

Now, we've not yet come to our gospel text of interest today(!), from which I'll pull just one line: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”. If the treasure is “winning” at any cost, this is where our heart will be found, and not in the well-being of the other hearts which might be crushed in achieving that end. We might lament the great cost but we will nonetheless pay it because we treasure the end more than the human coin to be paid for it.

Yet, Christian faith declares that pain, suffering and death are never means to an end with God. God does not kill or oppress for some higher cause. God can *use* such suffering in a world which constantly generates it – this is part of the meaning of the church's talk of incarnation. The cross of Jesus is not God's plan or work but our own, even if God uses it to reveal grace and hope.

The problem with the Crows' training camp was not merely that it happened but that it could have been thought to be worth trying in the first place, brutalising human hearts towards some inhuman end: “winning”. God does not treasure the end which can be achieved by what God can do with or to us. Human beings are not means to ends – even God's own ends. God treasures not the end but *us*: we are the end *and* the means, and so we – treasured and nurtured – are paramount in all things.

In our reading from Hebrews this morning, we heard of those whose faith was a desire for “a better country”. This is a country in which hearts don't so much treasure *things* but *are* the treasured thing, a country in which hearts, souls and bodies are ends *and* means – heart begetting heart. Heart is God's end, and so also God's means.

If we are to treasure what God treasures, we do not climb over each other to reach up to heaven. We have no vision of the future which requires that others don't get there but are merely the means by which *we* get there. Rather, we reach down and pull the other up a little higher. For we do not climb to heaven but are drawn there. When a heaven like this comes, it captures us all because, drawing each other up, we are holding hands, so that catching one of us catches us all.

Let us then, with those faithful ones in Hebrews, desire such a country as this: a world in which we seek the peace we so earnestly desire *by the means of* peace – the treasuring of hearts – that it might be peace not just for us but for all.
