
Sacrificing War

Genesis 22

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 13, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

“My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.” These are the words of Wilfred Owen, a second lieutenant with the Manchester Regiment of the British Army in the First World War. Owen died a week before the war ended. He was 25. His words were recorded by the composer Benjamin Britten on the title page of the score for his *War Requiem*, a work that juxtaposes the Latin mass for the dead with Owen’s own war poetry.

My subject today is war, and the pity of war. The upcoming performance of Britten’s *War Requiem* next weekend is a suitable occasion for us all to reflect on war in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And here we find an ambivalence that’s represented in my own family. My father and his father were both clergymen. But they were also soldiers. Time after time in the First World War my grandfather dragged fellow soldiers back into the trenches after they’d been shot or wounded. Three times he won the Military Cross for acts of exemplary gallantry. My father fought in North Africa and Italy in the Second World War. He and his father had one thing in common. To my knowledge they never willingly talked about anything they’d seen or done in the war. I knew better than to ever bring the subject up. I want today to do justice to their courage; but also to their silence.

When Aristotle wrote his treatise on the nature of virtue, his model of courage was the soldier. And in many ways rightly so. Let me suggest three such ways. (1) The novelist E.M. Forster famously said that if he had to choose between betraying his country and betraying his friend, he hoped he would have the guts to betray his country. But for a soldier it’s usually a false distinction. Because soldiers in battle fight for their friends. They make friendships more intense, more intimate than any they have ever known before. And when Jesus says “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” soldiers know exactly what he’s talking about. You don’t hurl yourself into the shelling and rifle fire of no man’s land because you believe in freedom, justice or the flag; you do it because you see your friend Bobby’s been hit, and you can’t bear for him to die because he’s dearer to you than your own life.

(2) The second noble thing about soldiers is that they’re a witness to the world that there’s something that matters more than self-preservation. Wars are fought over matters of principle. You may remember Groucho Marx said “These are my principles; if you don’t like them – I have others.” Soldiers are a witness that some principles are worth dying for. Some principles are more important than life itself. A person who believes and embodies that is a person of rare integrity and courage. And that’s how war relieves us of our cynicism, a cynicism that could otherwise eat our lives up from the inside.

(3) The third noble thing about soldiers is that they fight only according to the principles of the just war. In other words they try with all their being to ensure their killing is never murder. In fact they’d rather die than commit murder. But they still believe it’s sometimes legitimate to kill. Sadly it’s almost impossible to name any modern war that meets all the criteria for the declaration, conduct and conclusion of a just war.

And yet we cannot imagine a world without war. And so we believe in war. How we believe in war. Sometimes it seems we believe in war more than we believe in God – not just as a means to an end but even as an end in itself. We want to believe there’s something more precious than life itself. It’s exhilarating feeling something so deeply that it goes beyond our ability to express it in words. Once a war begins the lives of the fallen become their own irrefutable logic. That logic is simple: this war must be about something more important than life, otherwise these beloved men and women would not be dead. And war, with its fear, comradeship, intensity, pride, and all-consuming demands on our loyalty, gives a depth and significance to lives that might otherwise have been idled away in mundane obscurity. Yes, war shows us depravity, ugliness and horrifying cruelty; but it’s intoxicating because it raises our passion above the trivial and turns regular foot-soldiers into thrilling heroes. It gives a nation a reason for being, a moment to define itself, and a story to tell. War is disturbingly

beautiful. At the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1862 Robert E. Lee said “It’s well that war is so terrible – otherwise we would grow too fond of it.”

In England the uniquely just war that’s taken as a template for all other wars is the Second World War. The war was against German aggression, but is remembered as a war to save the Jews. In the Northern United States it seems to me the uniquely just war is taken to be the Civil War, which was really a war about secession but is remembered as a war to free the slaves. The American Civil War arguably invented the notion of total war – war involving every dimension of military and civilian life. Total war is nothing less than a massive sacrifice upon a national altar. Chaplains and theologians of the time saw the Civil War as a baptism of blood in which a new nation was being born, an atoning sacrifice that made a sacred people. One Confederate chaplain even prayed these astonishing words: “We should add to the prayer for peace, *let this war continue*, if we are not yet so humbled and disciplined by its trials, as to be prepared for those glorious moral and spiritual gifts, which Thou designest it should confer upon us as a people.” Can you imagine praying “Let this war continue?” Only perhaps if you believe in war more than you believe in God.

War becomes the way we know something’s true. What’s true in our culture comes to be defined by the things we go to war for. But the truth that war is, is not the truth of Christ. War is indeed a sacrifice. But it’s not an atoning sacrifice. It’s not a sacrifice that takes away sin. War is America’s altar. But war is a drug that constantly demands more sacrifices, more death offerings given up to remind ourselves that we’re capable of justifying and redeeming our transient lives. If there was no war, there would be no way to express and affirm ultimate value, no way to tie our nation to that ultimate value, and no way to inscribe that ultimate value in our bones.

But what if we *did* know something was true? What if we *did* believe something was truer than war? In Wilfred Owen’s poem *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*, featured prominently in Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*, Owen begins “So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went, And took the fire with him, and a knife. And as they sojourned both of them together, Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father, Behold the preparations, fire and iron, But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?” Owen is building up to the moment where God offers the ram instead of Isaac, echoing today’s Old Testament lesson from Genesis 22. And Owen’s classical 14 line sonnet is rounded off with the words “Lo! an angel called him out of heaven, Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, Neither do anything to him, thy son. Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns, A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.”

The poignancy of the story of Abraham and Isaac is that Isaac utterly trusts Abraham and Abraham utterly trusts God. Christians read the story in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. We see Jesus reflected in Isaac, because we see Jesus’ utter trust for his Father and we see the sacrifice to which Jesus is put. We see Jesus also reflected in the ram, because, unlike Isaac, Jesus really is sacrificed to the point of death. Jesus is the Lamb of God whose sacrifice delivers us from death. Because of Jesus we can see ourselves as Isaac, bound to death but delivered by grace.

And this is the Christian gospel. All the pointlessness and horror of human existence is drawn into the vortex of the cross. The cross is what happens when unending love becomes bonded to a human nature and imagination that can’t tolerate it. The cross is humanity’s allergic reaction to the love of God. But the reason why the cross is good news is that the early church recognized it as the *last* sacrifice, the one that finally took away sin and became the death of war. The sacrifice of the Son of God is the sacrifice to end all sacrifice. So the war to end all wars was not the Civil War or the First or the Second World War: it was the cross. The dividing wall of hostility between us and God has tumbled down. The good news of the cross is fundamentally that the war is over.

This good news is embodied in the architecture of Coventry Cathedral. Like Dresden in eastern Germany, Coventry was flattened by blanket bombing in the Second World War. The cathedral was reduced to ruins. Rather than obscure the horror and simply rebuild it, the diocese left the cross-shaped ruin as it was and built a resurrected cathedral beside it, as a visual testament to the shape of our redemption in Jesus: cross on one side, not obscured but transcended by resurrection on the other. Britten’s *War Requiem* was first performed at the reconsecration of the cathedral in 1962. The building is saying that the cross is more real than war, but we can live despite the cross because God in Christ has given us the resurrection. Standing in the ruins of Coventry

Cathedral helps me be reconciled to my father and grandfather, to their courage and their silence. I believe Jesus Christ is the end of war. But I honor those whose courage has led them to die in war – while I long for Christ's death to transform our imaginations so that future generations won't have to face a death like theirs.

And here the irony of Wilfred Owen's poem becomes almost unbearable. Because the poem is a sonnet it ought to finish at the end of the fourteenth line, "Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns, A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead." What a perfect ending. "Offer the Ram of Pride instead." Despite all the military language of the poem, war is not inevitable. Accept the cross, allow your pride to die and stop trying to make meanings, purposes and glories for yourself that are greater than the ones God has given you.

But the poem doesn't stop there. Jarring the principles of poetry, the gospel and almost any logic, Owen somberly records what happened next. "But the old man would not so, but slew his son, And half the seed of Europe, one by one." In the *War Requiem*, those final words are repeated: "And half the seed of Europe, one by one. And half the seed of Europe, one by one. And half the seed of Europe, one by one. And half the seed of Europe, one by one." Owen portrays the First World War as a rejection of the Christian gospel. He sees it as a declaration that sacrifice must continue because the sacrifice of Christ is not enough. In other words, we're not clear we believe in God but we know for sure that we believe in war.

And here we have the starkest possible clash of meanings. For the Confederate chaplain who prayed "Let this war continue," war is the way God makes us noble, gives us dignity, and shows us truth. For Wilfred Owen God gives us the sacrifice that ends all war, and thus war becomes the most profound way in which we show our rejection of God.

The final irony of war lies one step further. Like irony in general, it has to be handled with care, because irony seems like an insult when one's living with the crucified hearts and loves and memories of war. But the irony needs nonetheless to be named. For Christians, the problem with the weapons of war is fundamentally not that they're too strong but that they're too weak. God has shown us how he goes about setting things straight. The way God redeems evil is not by responding in kind but through self-giving, patient, open-hearted non-resistant love. So it's not that war is so powerful that it's more powerful than God. It's that war is a failed attempt to establish our own meaning, when God has already *given* us the world's meaning in Christ's death and resurrection.

And that's why the picture on the cover of your bulletin is the Christian response to war. The setting is the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral. In other words it's surrounded by the cross. It's not set in a fantasy land where war doesn't exist; it's set in a context dominated by the damage war has done. It portrays a Caucasian man and an East Asian woman. They're kneeling, as in prayer. But there's someone in the way – someone in between each of them and God. In the case of the man, it's clear he can't be reconciled with God unless he's first reconciled with the woman. And likewise the woman can't be reconciled with God unless she's first reconciled with the man.

Anyone who's really done it knows that reconciliation is harder than war. To destroy a bridge takes a second. To build one takes far longer. To kill can take a moment. To forgive can take a lifetime. The qualities that ennoble war are friendship, loyalty, courage and unselfishness. These qualities are all required to make peace. The trouble is, while we keep war on the table as an option, we shall never fully use those qualities to make peace. We shall prop up the weakness of war, and never develop the imagination and creativity that constitute the power of peace.

The saddest day in modern American history was September 12. The previous day the nation suffered a grievous blow. What took place went to the core of our common life, and made us search desperately for meaning, personally and collectively. We slept nervously or not at all. The following day was a defining moment for America and its friends' sense of God and America and its friends' place in the world. Would the cross be followed by resurrection? Would the sacrifice of the cross be seen as the end of sacrifice? Would America and its friends show the world that they believed in God more than they believed in war? In Owen's words, would they not "slaughter the lamb of pride instead"?

You know the answer. America and England came out all guns blazing. Like the old man in Wilfred Owen's poem, we would not so, and slew our sons. And half the promises of the kingdom of God, one by one.

The Parable of the Old Man and the Young by Wilfred Owen

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him, thy son.
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.