
The Ultimate Sacrifice

Hebrews 7.27

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 29 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

A number of people have asked me to preach a sermon about Iraq. Imagine you've let yourself into someone else's home and you find yourself in the kitchen. You reach up and open a cupboard door. Out fall a deluge of tightly stacked items, crashing down on your head and tumbling all over the floor. As well as being in a lot of pain, you may well feel pretty stupid. You may be saying to yourself "I shouldn't be *in* this house. I certainly shouldn't have opened the door without checking what was inside." But feeling stupid and full of shame shouldn't stop you doing the one thing you simply *must* do. And that is, to get on your knees, clean up after yourself, and try to put everything back in the cupboard as best you can.

That's pretty much all I've had to say about Iraq. We made this mess. We have to clean it up. We won the war in a few weeks. We've been losing the peace ever since. But seeing the death toll rise to unprecedented levels, and seeing today's text from Hebrews 7, I sense maybe it's time to say a little more. "Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself."

I'm going to take you to some sand dunes a long way from Baghdad or Fort Bragg. The British novelist Melvyn Bragg grew up in Cumbria, on the north-west coast of England. His novel *A Soldier's Return* (Arcade 2003) tells the story of Sam, a lieutenant in the British army in Burma during the Far Eastern campaign of the Second World War. There are two settings for the novel. The first is a Cumbrian market town, where Sam tries with great difficulty to settle into the rhythms of work and family life. The second is Burma, to which Sam's mind and the narrative of the novel frequently return in flashbacks – flashbacks that explain why settling back into mundane provincial life is such a challenge.

Sam tries to deal with his inner turmoil by writing letters to the families of his soldiers who lost their lives during the fighting in Burma. Because his regiment all came from Cumbria, Sam has the opportunity to go and visit some of the families. I'm going to read to you now about how Sam visited Mr. and Mrs. Bell, whose son Ian had been a member of Sam's company.

Over tea, very awkwardly, but that was appropriate, Sam told them what a good soldier Ian had been. He told them how much he had talked about his family and how much he cared about them and missed them. He told them that Ian was brave and popular and helped others when they needed it. And finally he confirmed what he had written in his letter, that Ian had been shot by a sniper, an unexpected, instant death. 'He can't have felt a thing,' Sam concluded, and the silence was like a prayer. It was broken only when Mrs. Bell left the room.

They finished their tea.

'I'll get a bit of air with you.' Mr. Bell pulled on his jacket and screwed a hat on his balding head.

They talked a little, Sam wheeling the bike. Once through the small village, Mr. Bell swung away on to one of the many narrow, hard-packed tracks which led into the dunes. Sam had no option but to follow him.

They stood side by side on a tiny hill of sand, Sam holding his bike beside him, Mr. Bell looking intently across the water to Scotland.

He offered Sam a [cigarette] and the two men lit up.

'I was in the First War,' the older man said, 'with the medical lads. I told the recruitment I wasn't going to kill anybody, but I wasn't going to let them think I was frightened either. Our job was to go into no-man's land and bring back what was left to our own trenches.'

He spoke unemotionally. They were isolated on the dune. The tide had turned and was racing in with treacherous speed. He paused before continuing. 'You've never seen such messes. You can't imagine. What can be done to a man, especially to his face. You get used to heaving up. I didn't eat on the morning of the attack. It was just a waste.' He paused again. 'So you see, Sam, you can tell me exactly what did happen to our Ian.'

He did not turn around to look at the younger man.

Sam, already tired by the strain of meeting Ian's parents, was jolted by his intuition. He collected himself. The wind appeared to pick up. Its moan grew louder in the telephone wires on the road just behind them.

'It was a fine day,' he began, 'and we were in a safe clearing. Hundreds of us,' and the large clearing in Burma was as visible as the beach before him. 'We were in no sort of danger. We'd been through a bad patch but the Japs had pulled right back. We were checking on our

equipment and making good what had been damaged and resting up—you'll know about that. You know how tidy Ian was. Well—'

Sam had been no more than three or four feet away from Ian. Other men from the section were strewn around almost as near, oiling their rifles, polishing the bayonets, repairing the ravages of combat. Close beyond them were scores of others about the same business.

'It was a good time. The Japs were nowhere near. We were on a sort of break. For a day or two, maybe more.

Ian. He could remember every moment. Ian had been smiling, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, his equipment laid neatly around him. He wore that rather balmy, contented expression which Sam had come to like – Ian's off again, he would say to himself, off into a world of his own. Ian had caught Sam's smile and understood, fully, its meaning and thrown him the pack of cigarettes as a sort of acknowledgement. Then, he went back to his dreaming and his fastidious cleaning.

'I can see it now. He was cleaning a grenade. I'll never know why as long as I live.' Sam swallowed. His throat was dry. 'He pulled the pin before removing the fuse. What was he thinking? So,' Sam paused, 'he had a count of five before it blew up.'

That look. Sam could not, would not want to forget that look. For both had known, instantaneously, that there was nowhere to throw the grenade without killing some of the others. There was nowhere at all to throw it. Ian's look had been of wonder and then, this was cored on Sam's mind although he could scarcely credit it, Ian had smiled, gently, sweetly, like he did sometimes and he had tried to say something before he violently twisted himself over and flattened himself on to the grenade, taking the full weight of the blast into his own body. He did not die for almost two hours. He had tried so hard to stop himself from crying out. Every so often he said, 'Sorry'. Sorry! You never walked away from that.

Somehow, wholly understated, Sam conveyed the essence of that to Mr. Bell. The older man took a half-step forward as if hit and his shoulders slumped, his head bent forward as if he were bowing. A spasm, a retch of shock went through him and he wiped his lips. 'I'll not tell his mother,' he said eventually. 'She can't fully cope as it is.'

He indicated he wanted to be alone. Sam left him without a word, wheeling his bike carefully as if afraid he might damage it. When he came to the road, he looked back. The old man stood firm, unbowed now, enduring. (pp. 114-117)

I'd like to focus our attention on the three men in this story. Each of those men knew intimately about the sacrifice of war. The first, Ian, never came back from the war. The second, Sam, did come back but had lost everything. The novel is really about Sam. It's about what happens when you've lost your stomach and your heart but you begin trying to live again. The third character, Mr. Bell, stayed in England but his life without his son would never be the same again. So one never came back; one came back but lost everything; one stayed but would never be the same. Each knew the sacrifice of war.

I want to suggest to you that the story of Ian, Sam and Mr. Bell can be read as a story about God. When Ian looks around the camp and realizes that there is nowhere he can throw the grenade, he shows us the face of Christ. Within the ghastly carnage and destruction of war, we catch this glimpse of what and who Jesus is. Jesus is the one man who dies so that all may live. Ian experiences in his own body the price of human folly and failure. Why does the pin come out of the grenade? We don't really know. Why does humanity find itself at enmity with itself and at enmity with God? We don't really know. Almost every explanation is really a description of the symptoms. But that the grenade is ticking away, that what we have set loose stands to do untold damage to us and to all creation – that we know very well. And here is Ian, here is Christ, bent double over the force that threatens to obliterate us, laying down his life that we might be saved.

And in Sam we see God the comforter just as strongly represented. Sam is the one who as the commanding officer represented a kind of parent to Ian. Now, back in Cumbria, he represents Ian to Ian's parents. And uncannily Mr. and Mrs. Bell see Ian in Sam, and Sam sees Ian in Mr. and Mrs. Bell. Sam makes his parents present to Ian and makes Ian present to his parents. Sam is the bearer of two stories: the story that Ian died as part of a war that was finally won – the story he tells to Mrs. Bell; and the story that Ian died through stupidity and carelessness and folly and in the end through an act of courageous sacrifice that can only evoke awe and astonishment – the story Sam tells to Mr. Bell. Sam gives us a picture of the Holy Spirit – the comforter, the one who makes Christ present, the one who offers the face of Christ to the Father and the face of the Father to Christ, the one who breathes into life the story of salvation.

And in Mr. Bell we see what it means to lose your only son. In Mr. Bell we see what it means to carry in your heart two stories about what your son's death means. The first story is a story of glory, a story in which Ian's death is part of a great achievement, in this case victory in Burma, success in the Far East campaign, peace in our time. The second story is one of folly, no enemy anywhere near, a happy lazy sunny afternoon, a careless lapse in attention, and a breathtaking moment of agonizing courage. In Mr. Bell we see God the Father, whose only Son dies through a mixture of his indescribable love and our unspeakable folly, and who must live with these two profound truths in his heart for ever.

And now at last it's time to return to the subject of Iraq. Many of us want to tell an angry story about Iraq, rather like the story Mr. Bell tells about the First World War – a story of corrupt policy, counterproductive intervention and wasted resources, a story of hundreds of poor Americans dying to sustain the lifestyle and security of their richer compatriots. Many of us want to tell a more idealized story, rather like the story Sam tells Mrs. Bell about Ian, a story of inevitable casualties on the rolling march to democracy and freedom. But the figure the coalition needs to reckon with today is not Mr. Bell or Sam. It is Ian. Ian took the pin out of the grenade. The US-led coalition took the pin out of Iraq. The pin is out of the grenade, like it or not. There are two options. One is to put as much distance as we can between ourselves and the grenade, whoever else the grenade might kill. But that was not Ian's way. Ian's way was to take the destruction in his own body and in doing so to save the life of others.

What might it mean for the coalition to be like Ian? It means to stop pretending the war was wise: to say invading Iraq was wise is like saying Ian was wise to take the pin out of the grenade. It means to stop pretending the coalition can just clear out. As for Ian, so for the coalition: running away would just lead to carnage. It means to stay until the Iraqi forces can do at least a no worse job than the coalition forces are currently doing – in other words, to stay until the grenade has done its worst. (Or, to return to my opening analogy of the kitchen cupboard, not to tidy up the cupboard, but at least to get it to shut.)

To be like Ian means two final things. Ian shows us the only way to redeem the horror of war. Killing is so abhorrent to him that he avoids it even at the cost of his own life. He turns his whole body into the shape it needs to be to make his companions' life possible. He makes the worst horror into something beautiful. This is how he imitates Christ: by shaping his body so as to give us life. This is how he models the life of the Church: a body shaped to bring life to others. This is what the Church asks of the coalition countries: to shape their abundant resources to give life to the world, not to continue to kill others to secure life for themselves.

And lastly Ian dies saying sorry. He has made such a sacrifice, it seems crazy to be saying sorry. But the truth is, he has made a mess, and even his noble sacrifice still leaves his fellow soldiers with a disaster. The last thing being like Ian means for the coalition is that once the grenade has done its worst, however great the sacrifice made, it will still be time for us to say sorry.

The irony won't be lost on you. The more like Ian the churches become, the emptier they will be. The more like Ian the coalition's policy becomes, the more unpopular it will get. But in this gruesome story of merciless tyranny, reckless invasion and teeming civil war, becoming more like Ian is our only option: because it's the only way we can hope to glimpse the glory of God.