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## Three Kinds of Sacrifice

A Sermon Preached at Bald Head Island Chapel, NC, Sunday May 27 2007

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When we gather together to remember those that have died in war, we share stories and strive to make meanings. And certain words recur – words like noble, and honour, and freedom, and dignity. But perhaps the most common word of all is a religious one: sacrifice. I want to reflect briefly on three kinds of sacrifice in our minds today.

The first is the sacrifice of the unwillingness to kill. When we send soldiers to war we ask them to overturn everything we teach them about life. Consider this story of a soldier in WW2. The soldier was among a company being attacked by a sniper. The sniper was a fishing shack, and was picking off soldiers one by one. The soldier was terrified by fear, but he broke into the shack and found himself in an empty room. There was a door to another room. He realised he needed to break this second door down, but he feared that when he did so the sniper would kill him.

But it turned out the sniper was stuck in a sniper harness and could not turn around fast enough. The soldier recalled, "He was entangled in the harness so I shot him with a revolver and I felt remorse and shame. I can remember whispering foolishly, 'I'm sorry' and then just throwing up . . . I threw up all over myself. It was a betrayal of what I'd been taught since a child."

Suddenly this man was isolated. He discovered he was a killer. Here is another account, this time of a friend listening as a Vietnam war veteran talks one afternoon in a parish hall. Beside the bar, an older woman began to attack him. "You got no right to snivel about your little half-baked war. World War Two was a real war. Were you even alive then? Huh? I lost a brother in World War Two." The two friends tried to ignore her; she was only a local character. But finally the veteran had had enough. He looked at her and calmly, coldly said: "Have you ever had to kill anyone?" "Well no!" she answered belligerently. "Then what right have you got to tell me anything?"

There was a long, painful silence throughout the hall, as would occur in a home where a guest had just witnessed an embarrassing family argument. Then the friend asked quietly, "When you got pushed just now, you came back with the fact that you had to kill in Vietnam. Was that the worst of it for you?" "Yah," he said. "That's half of it." I waited for a very long time, but he didn't go on. He only stared into his beer. Finally I had to ask, "What was the other half?" "The other half was that when we got home, nobody understood."

And this is the second sacrifice we expect of our soldiers. We expect them to enter a level of experience that separates them from community, to enter a world of silence, because nobody that hasn't had to make that sacrifice really understands. Comrades in arms have a level of intimacy that is enhanced by the sense of suffering for the pursuit of a higher good. Soldiers often form bonds with one another that are stronger than the bonds they have with their wives. And Memorial Day is a recognition of the dignity of this intimacy, but also of its cost.

For it is not just the fallen we remember today: it is those whose lives were never the same again – soldiers, families and friends. We hear the echo of the veteran's words 'nobody understood'. Memorial Day is a small gesture to say, 'at least we are trying'. Our silence is a silence of gratitude and an effort to understand.

But there is a third sacrifice we recall today. And that is the sacrifice of the cross. Jesus went to the cross as one who knew that his embodiment of God's never-ending love meant he was going to have to face death. But the whole shape of the Old and New Testaments presents Jesus' sacrifice as only making sense as the last sacrifice, the one that finally took away sin and inaugurated the peaceful flourishing of all creation in God's company. The sacrifice of the Son of God is the sacrifice to end all sacrifice. So the war to end all wars was not the First World War: it was the cross. The good news of the cross is fundamentally that the war is over.

And that is a truth to die for. But not necessarily a truth to kill for. For how can we share that good news with someone we have killed? And yet, 90 years on from the war to end all wars, 2000 years on from the resurrection that proclaimed the war is over, we are still asking our soldiers to make these awesome sacrifices. And with astonishing courage and dignity, they continue to do so.

Sometimes I think if we asked our heavenly Father what was the worst part of the cross he would pause for a long time and say 'the sacrifice of my only Son... that was half of it.' And if we waited in a terrible silence and finally found courage to ask "What was the other half?", he would say, "The other half was that 2000 years later, nobody understood."