

Remembrance – Armistice Day, November 11th, 2018

Readings from Pentecost 25B: Ruth 3: 1-5, 4: 13-17, Psalm 127, Hebrews 9:24-28, Mark 12:28-44

A New Order of Things

Introduction

Charlie Chaplin was nothing if not perceptive. At the height of World War II, his film “The Great Dictator”, sought to expose the essence of authoritarianism, pin-pointed in the comical personalities of Adenoid Hynkel (Adolf Hitler) and Benzino Napaloni (Benito Mussolini). Chaplin identifies that at the heart of authoritarianism lies human fear which finds its expression in the desire to dominate. In our clip, this desire is laughed at, lampooned, made fun of, through the chair incident. To ensure that Adenoid Hynkel maintains the upper hand, Benzino Napaloni must always be ‘be looking up at him’ while Adenoid, looks down. The French anthropologist, Rene Girard, talks about this sort of human behaviour - I have referred to him at other times - as “*mimesis*” - another word for this is “copying”. Girard points out that we are wired “to desire according to the desires of another”, we want what they want. That is how we learn, it is how cultures and sub-cultures form. It also explains why we enter into conflict, as rivalries develop and we begin to fear each other. I want to do two things in this meditation: first refer to Remembrance or Armistice Day - an important day in the western calendar. Second, I want to move to our biblical readings, Ruth and Mark, to reflect more deeply. Finally, I want to draw some conclusions about our thinking.

Remembrance – Armistice Day

Today we commemorate the end of World War I. Why do we remember this day, more than say the end of World War II, or the end of the Korean War, or the Vietnam War? The reason is this: that World War I marked the hiatus, the definitive break between one world and another, between one history and another. It marked a breakdown in the old order and the birth of a new one. How so? “What was the difference between the pre and post-World War I orders? Let me put it simply: the end of competing empires, the rebellion of the working class against its perpetual servitude under brutal industrial free market capitalism; and the death of an old intellectualism, including Christian faith and theology, that had served the ruling German and British elites. In short, the old *mimesis*, the old rivalries that led to the Western Front, killing everything and everyone, was itself put to death. There had to be a new beginning...and there was...of sorts

That said, the natural question as we sit here this morning is: what is it then, that we take from Remembrance Day? We could put that another way, in line with what I have presented to you through our liturgy: what is it that Remembrance Day brings to us, actualizes for us? I have no doubt that people interpret Remembrance Day in many different ways. For some it is about BBQs. For others who think a little more, it is a about ‘sacrifice’...but there the thinking stops. For others it is the idea that “we won”, that the rivalries had been tested, that the Anglo-Saxon powers for liberalism were victorious...and God was in his heaven. For still others - in particular those reading through a Jesus-centred lens - Remembrance Day brings to us the invitation, the constant invitation, to move beyond a rivalrous, tribalistic understanding of ourselves, to stop strutting our stuff, to quit our incessant and exhausting self-promotion, whether of the individual, the group or the nation: the very thing that murdered Europe. Placing it in the context of Paul’s insight on the first page of our liturgy, “Semitic and non-Semitic identities, class identities, gender identities, cultural identities, national identities: none are categorical, none are exhaustive definitions of who we really are. They are but incidental”. So, in this light, Remembrance Day is the call to “get over ourselves” and to begin to see ourselves, others, and the world in another way, to assume a

different world-view. But what is that world-view? In a word, “multi-lateral”. A world where we interact with each other, engaging and learning with grace and imagination. Let’s explore today’s readings! They may help us gain clarity.

Ruth and Jesus: Stories of Multilateralism

The story of Ruth is an extraordinary tale, and sadly, it is not read with the creativity it merits. Usually, it is interpreted as a story about loyalty between two women and the loyalty of an honourable man. But there is much more to it than that. It is a heart-warming story, but it also challenges the historic prejudices and rivalry of the ancient world. In fact, it is extraordinary that it ever made it into the Hebrew Bible, because it is story told by Jews against Jews.

Ruth is a Moabite, not a Jew. For ancient Israel, there is no such thing as a good Moabite - at odds for centuries with Jewish national aspirations; atheists ‘to boot’. But here comes the surprise. Ruth, of all people, is the means of grace, of selfless love for her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi. The story of Ruth challenges the smugness of Jewish identity, its sense that it has a monopoly over the things of God. The story of Ruth reminds us that virtue can be found anywhere and that God can and does use those we might detest as unclean, as outsiders, in his work in the world. The story of Ruth is a demand made upon the Jews to move beyond their religiously justified xenophobia.

Mark, is saying the same thing, in a different context. Jesus’ attack upon the Temple is about its *exclusive* view of the world. On the basis of ritual sacrifice, Jews were deemed to be clean or unclean, acceptable or unacceptable. Faith then, became a *means to exclusion rather than inclusion*. The favourable comparison made between the poor elderly woman and the religious professionals, is two-fold: first, that she gives not just from her income, but her assets – in other words that her faith is a serious thing, it costs; and second that the structures of grace that are capable of encouraging people to faith, are abused by the very clergy who are there precisely to ensure their integrity.

In both readings, the horror is that Hebrew faith runs the enormous risk of being little more than just an institutional expression of the human tribal desire: against a vulnerable Moabite woman and against a poor elderly Jewish woman. Jesus’ vision is one that moves beyond *mimesis*, rivalry, exclusivism and ultimately, oppression, to a multilateral world-view: inclusive of all.

Today

In a world that appears to be returning to the atomization of the period prior to World War I – history never quite repeats itself, but does do some similar things in different ways – the Christian call has never been so strong – to see the other who is different to us, not through the lens of fear and rivalry, but as a surprise: a surprise, we may not fully understand, but a surprise who may free us to shed our pretensions and disguises that ultimately kill us.

Let’s face it: to live like Adenoid Hynkel or Benzino Napaloni is just too exhausting.

May this day be one of reflection and meditation and prayer!

