

North Kildonan United Church

8th November 2020 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Remembrance Sunday

“Ethics to Live By”

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

I Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Matthew 25: 1-13

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19:14)

In last Sunday's sermon I focussed a bit on the life of George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community. Today, as we observe Remembrance Sunday, let's begin with Dr. MacLeod's account of one incident during the First World War. In a sermon in August 1956 he writes:

"There is an incident in my life that still makes me go hot and cold with shame. I was an officer in the First World War. I was travelling on Christmas Eve to London in the last night train out of Bristol.

Three of us were playing cards in a first-class carriage. The third class were packed like sardines down the corridor. We stopped at Bath.

I could point out to you now the position in the station where our carriage stopped: there were lights there, and there. On the platform there was a seething mass of troops trying to get the last train into London for Christmas. 'Let's in, governor' they said, their faces jammed against the window. Up came the station master. 'You men can't get in except these officers say yes.'

We were playing cards, we were comfortable. We said 'No'. And on the instant, out moved the train. At that moment we came to: we were aghast: we pulled the communication cord. It was broken.

And to my dying day I shall see the faces of the men we left to celebrate Christmas away from home.

Father, forgive us, we didn't know what we were doing.

This is the sort of thing that also crucifies Christ.

I am forgiven, but I won't forget."

Sobering words on a solemn day of remembrance.

Our lessons this day are the ones suggested by the lectionary for this Sunday in November, not for Remembrance Sunday. But I think we might find some connection between our reading from Joshua and the focus of this Remembrance Sunday.

This account from Joshua is a continuation of the story begun with Moses leading the people from slavery to freedom. The years of wilderness wandering are over, and the people are settled in the Promised Land. In today's lesson, Joshua has gathered the tribes of Israel together to renew their covenant, to rededicate themselves as followers of God.

Joshua puts the question to them. *"Are you willing to serve the Lord, or follow other gods? Where is your heart, your mind, your hope?"* Then Joshua declares his intention in words familiar to many people: *"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."*

This is a serious, life-changing question put to the people. The Lord God, who led them to freedom and new life, who calls the people to be in a covenant relationship, this God will not be fooled by empty promises and shallow declarations of loyalty. If you are serious, ready to follow God, Joshua says: *"then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel."*

But what does it mean to serve the Lord? Amongst other things it is to live ethically and morally.

Earlier this season, as we were working our way through Exodus, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was quoted more than once. Until fairly recently he was the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, the author of many books and commentaries, and the presenter on several YouTube programmes. Part of the appeal with Rabbi Sacks is his broad understanding of religion. As a boy he attended Christian schools and he clearly values Christianity. Growing up in England, he appreciates the Anglican middle way, which allows for differences of opinion and thought.

On this day, as we remember the horrors of war and the causes of war, it would be helpful to ponder the seven features of Jewish ethics as presented by Rabbi Sacks. So, with Joshua's declaration in mind: *"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord"*, let's explore the role of ethical behaviour and thought in making for peaceful living.

The first is **Human Dignity**. Though science may say we share 98% of our genes with the primates, humans are not animals. We are created in the image of God and precious. In Jewish thought, when a person destroys a life, it is as if he or she has destroyed a universe. When a person saves a life, it is as if that person has saved a universe. Each of us is different, unique, and cherished, made in the image of God. And as such, each of us has the right to life, the gift of our Creator.

Human Freedom. Each human being is free to choose how they will live their life, if they will make choices that lead to fullness of life or death, and our fate, if you will, is determined by our choices. We are moral agents, accountable and responsible for our actions. That involves self-discipline, which we learn within a strong and loving family, in

other words a shared moral code that directs daily living. Respect, kindness, care for others don't just happen, they are learned within the family.

The Sanctity of Life. The Torah is a protest against the use of violence to attain human ends, writes Rabbi Sacks. The human drama can be summed up this way. God is free. God created order. God gives humans freedom. Humans create chaos. Can freedom and order coexist? Rabbi Sacks writes: *"Morality is that shared system of self-imposed restraints that allow my freedom to coexist with yours."*

The alternative to morality is violence. And violence is the imposition by force of my will on the world. Basically it's *"I want what you have and if you don't hand it over, I will hurt you."* Taken on a national scale, what better description of war is there.

Guilt, not Shame. A distinction is made between shame, which has to do with honour and what people see, and guilt, which is something we experience within us. To be shamed is to be marked, declared to be a bad person, written off as damaged goods. Think of the Hollywood sex scandals that happen every so often. Those accused are often shamed to the point of losing their livelihoods, relationships and positions in society. Trial by media is how it's described.

"You'll never work in this town again" is the language of shame. Which means that the only way to escape shame is to hide or leave and try to start over somewhere far away, or at the worst, to take one's own life. There is little to no room for confession, repentance, forgiveness and rehabilitation in a shame society. Shame destroys.

But guilt is based not on what is seen but what a person feels within. It is our conscience convicting us, and as such there is room to change and restore. There is a freedom to begin again with guilt that is not there with shame. Guilt can energize a person to begin over again.

For example, the story of Adam and Eve is all about shame, not guilt. It's only when they realize how others might see them that they feel shame for their nakedness. Judaism and Christianity are religions of guilt more than shame. That guilt is our inner voice convicting us to change our ways, making confession and seeking forgiveness and beginning again.

Loyalty and Love. The command to love God with all your heart, soul and might and to love your neighbour as yourself, and to love the stranger because you know what it's like to be a stranger, is a core ethic of Judaism and Christianity. This is more than a principle of justice, more than a golden rule of doing to others what you would have done to you. The command is to love, which is much more demanding than just not causing harm.

That command to love is rooted in the sanctity of marriage and solid family life, and Rabbi Sacks makes the point that the children of broken homes are the ones who are

now suffering substance abuse and other syndromes and disorders. And that's just the beginning of the problems.

The Ethics of Covenant. What does it mean to be in a covenantal relationship, say for instance in our neighbourhood. There was a time when we knew everyone on our street, and that knowledge helped shape our sense of what it meant to live in North Kildonan, or the West End, or St James or wherever. We were all part of the neighbourhood, all in it together, and often children from one household were welcome at the neighbours, till mom phoned to say it was time for supper. But the spirit of individualism that is common nowadays means that we often don't know who our neighbour is, and as such we don't feel connected to our neighbourhood. And when we need help, we don't know who to call upon.

The Dual Covenant. Through Noah, all people on earth are in covenant with God, but through the covenant made at Sinai, when Moses received the tablets of the Ten Commandments, Judaism, and I would add Christianity, entered into a specific covenant with God.

With the Noah covenant, the rainbow promise that God would never again destroy the earth, the implication is that even in time of war, there are those things which are morally impermissible because our opponents are still human and possess inalienable rights. When a soldier is taken prisoner, he or she is out of the battle and is not be killed. This is a classic understanding of war. But that understanding was completely abandoned during the Holocaust and not just then but how many other times.

These ethics are worth pondering, especially this day as we consider the causes of war and violence and unrest.

Ultimately, the people were not able to fully serve the Lord so they, and we, rely on God's love and faith in us. Jesus and St Paul certainly affirmed the conviction that it is God's love for us that carries us, God's faith in us that sustains us. Ethics and morality direct us in our way through life, shaping us in the way we should go. Let's end with these words from Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian of the 20th century.

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness." Amen.