

SACRIFICE

Mark 12: 37b–44

From the sermon on 8 November 2015 (Remembrance)

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Remembrance is a time when we stop to think about sacrifice. Today, Remembrance Sunday, we think of the sacrifice of soldiers who died for a cause that was bigger than them alone.

There are others who, like soldiers, have jobs that may mean their lives may be given up protecting or rescuing others. There's the sacrifice of fire-fighters who have died trying to save trapped people from a burning building or that of police officers trying to stop a disturbance. Then there are those who know that the lives they are leading make them a target. There's the sacrifice of those who gave their lives in the service of others and for a better world – people like Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Gandhi... and so many more. And for Christians, above all, there's the sacrifice of Jesus who died for the sake of the whole world.

Sometimes people give their lives as a sacrifice for others without intending to do so. Anyone who saw it will always remember the picture of the wee boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed up on the beach in Turkey. When that image appeared in the press, it seemed to be the catalyst for waking people up to the refugee crisis. The Independent's front page read: *Aylan Kurdi: whose death will save the lives of other refugees.*

These are examples of what we call the 'ultimate' sacrifice. Yet there are other kinds of sacrifice too. There are sacrifices we make in our lives which won't cause us to lose our life altogether but which can still be challenging and costly. We might do it for our partner or our children or ourselves (maybe for the sake of our health), or we might do it for a cause we believe in. It's clear that Jesus challenges us to be ready to sacrifice in his service. *Take up your cross.* (Matthew 16: 24) means being ready to sacrifice for God's sake.

At this time of Remembrance, maybe it's good to ask, *What are we doing?* We can buy a poppy, or even two, chuck some money in a can, stand for a minute's silence. Is that it? Is that all we do? Is that all Remembrance costs us? You might ask, *Should Remembrance cost us?* Well it should – if we are doing it right.

There are two parts to Remembrance. One is giving thanks for those who died by remembering and paying tribute to them. But the other is to pledge ourselves to making a more peaceful world and working for the time when war is no more. If we don't do anything about that second part, then our tribute to the fallen is a bit of a

waste of time. Our wearing of poppies and standing in silence (though these are fine things to do) cost us virtually nothing and are empty gestures if that's *all* we do – if we don't take up the big challenge of working for peace in the places where we are. Working for peace, and a better world is the best way to honour those who have fallen in war. That's true for all of us in the UK, but it's especially true for those of us who are Christians because Jesus calls us to be peacemakers.

There's an irony about Remembrance in that it seems to be taken very seriously, yet in fact, it's not taken seriously enough. In fact, one could argue that for the UK there is a particular challenge to face, for as a nation we have a peculiar addiction to weapons and to war. We are quick enough to enter into wars. Somehow we can find whatever money it takes for the fighting but we do it with no real plan for what happens next. We do it without thought for what needs to be done in whatever country it happens to be at the end of the fighting; how divisions can be healed; what the exit strategy will be.

Nor do we show enough attention even to our own servicemen and women to support them on their return. When a place like Erskine Hospital still needs to have door-to-door collections, we know it isn't being funded adequately. When the UK is still a world leader in arms exports, it seems we have learned nothing – especially when we are prepared to sell to some of the most vicious regimes.

Yesterday's main story in The Herald was the news that before next year's Holyrood elections the 'maingate' decision will be made on the renewal of Trident – a decision the Government seems confident of winning. When we get ready to create and unveil a new generation of weapons of mass destruction, in defiance of the treaty we have signed and against all morality and logic, it shows we are still blind.

There's been a lot of fuss ever since Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party. It's hard to see how things are going to work out between him and the party that he leads. It's hard to see how he can remain the leader for a long time. It's even harder to imagine him as Prime Minister.

It's also hard not to feel sorry for him; the abuse, the criticisms, the mocking of this guy by virtually all sides of the media in our country has been unprecedented and astonishing in its scale. But I don't want to argue for or against him today. You may love him or you may loathe him. Let's just zoom in on one particular incident. When asked about nuclear weapons, he said that he couldn't press the red button. He would not be prepared to unleash a weapon that would mean the deaths of millions of innocent people.

For this he was ridiculed and reviled! It seems that the entire media and most of the political establishment (certainly in Conservative and Labour terms) spoke with one

voice. He is not fit to lead a party and certainly not fit to lead the country because... he isn't ready to press the red button! Let's just freeze-frame this for a second. A man who is not willing to unleash a weapon that would cause indiscriminate slaughter of innocent civilians is not fit to be our Prime Minister??? A person who is ready to do that is usually the bad guy in James Bond films. A person who is ready to do that usually needs to be stopped and locked up.

In his memoir, *A Journey*, another former Labour leader, (Tony Blair) said that the money needed for nuclear weapons was outrageous, the weapons themselves were immoral and that they had no real military purpose. Despite all of that, he decided to keep them because if we didn't have them it would 'downgrade our status'. Apparently, our status depends on us having the biggest and most deadly weapons of mass destruction. Having the nastiest weapons is what makes us 'great'. As long as we continue to vote for politicians who think that morality and treaties we have signed matter less than astronomically expensive status symbols, we know we are in deep trouble.

Our reading today is set for the churches around the world and, of course, the whole world is not marking Remembrance Sunday this morning. So the story of the widow's mite has not been chosen with Remembrance Sunday in mind but I think it's a good reading for today because it is all about sacrifice.

What on earth did that woman have to offer? What good were her two little coins? Yet Jesus notices her and praises her because he knows what that money represented to her. For her, that money was a sacrifice.

What do we learn from this? We can all do something. If that unnamed poor widow can make a difference in God's eyes with all that she had (and all that she didn't have), then any one of us can do that too. God never calls on us to do things we *can't* do. But God does call on us to do what we *can* do. That will vary as we all vary. But we can all – every single one of us – do something. Whether that's giving to the church or taking time and effort to encourage peace, we can all do something. We need to be bold.

The Iona Community uses a responsive prayer with the words: *We will not offer to the Lord offerings that cost us nothing*. The trouble with the rich men at the temple was that their impressive offerings didn't amount to much for them; they were giving to God a small proportion of what they had and keeping the rest for themselves. On the other hand, the woman was giving her very best to God.

Perhaps for us this might mean putting ourselves out, sacrificing time and effort to make a small difference for peace in our homes, at our work, in the wider world or

perhaps it might mean thinking again about how much we are honouring God in our offerings week by week at church.

How much does God figure? How serious are we about our faith? Are we giving the least we can to God? Or are we giving generously and boldly? God sees and honours our efforts. One theme of today's reading is that of commitment and the way God honours commitment to the work of the Kingdom. That woman didn't have many resources to make a difference; in fact you could argue that her mite hardly made any difference at all. I'm sure the Temple treasurers wouldn't exactly be jumping up and down with glee when they saw what she had put into the plate.

But God sees something else. God sees it from a different angle and so Jesus praises the widow and singles her out for special attention. The small things we do can seem very big in God's eyes. God sees what we do and it is never forgotten if it's done for God. In fact, you could say it matters more than anything.

So are we willing to sacrifice for God's sake? What are we offering God in terms of our money and time and talent? What are we offering God in terms of working for peace? When we are prepared to be bold in God's name, it will not be unnoticed. Just like the widow and her offering in the temple plate, God sees, God notes and God will bless.

The way we best honour those who suffered and died in war today comes down to whether we leave here determined to do something for the cause of peace.

Will we do our bit to make this world safer and fairer and more peaceful?

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