

MEMORIES CAN HURT

NOVEMBER 9, 2008

This past week, the world has been fascinated by events in the political arena in the United States. CNN has announced the biggest audience in their history for one night. What was that night? You can guess it was the night Senator Barack Obama won the right to become the 44th President of his country. It was such a unique moment in history. The world held its breath to see if the American voters would take their leap of faith and elect their first African American to the White House.

You knew it was a moment in history. People lined up for hours to ensure they voted for their candidate. This time, fewer people were willing to be just observers – they wanted to be counted in their search for change and renewal. People took to the streets in neighbourhoods across America waiting with their neighbours for the outcome. No one wanted to miss this moment in their history.

Would any of us stand in line for many hours just to vote? The Americans, for all the knocks they receive from Canadians and other, are passionate about their country and in this election were clearly worried about the right leadership for the tough times ahead.

This Sunday we speak of remembering, of looking back to the sacrifice of so many others, that we may be free. It is important to remember and to keep alive the flame of hope so many died to preserve for our country and way of life.

What struck me as I watched the election night was the many moments of somber remembering back to the struggle of blacks in America since the days of slavery. Perhaps you recall our study these past weeks of Moses leading the people of Israel out of slavery and into a new land of freedom and independence. Moses himself died before they entered the new land but he was their leader in the many years in the wilderness between leaving Egypt and preparing to move into the Promised Land.

While they were in the wilderness, the people groaned most of the time about the hardships and the toughness of conditions in their life. Moses wanted them to learn to leave their slavery behind and to coalesce as a people who would be ready to take on the responsibility of freedom.

The election of Barack Obama as President Elect reminded me a little of this Moses story. From the time of the Civil War during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, African Americans had been technically free. And yet we all know the story of their fight for equality in places such as Selma, Montgomery and Mississippi. When Rosa Parks decided one day to no longer sit at the back of the bus as all blacks had to do, she unleashed decades of resistance by blacks who were determined to be equal in all ways. Though a high majority of blacks and whites in the USA were Christian believers who proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord and were themselves church goers, segregation was a hard fight to break down. To now be witness to an African American man elected as President, fulfills the dream of Martin Luther King and the thousands of Americans of all skin colours who have struggled for freedom and equality for every American.

Our first reading this morning was from the Prophet Amos. These words are appropriate for the events we have just seen and for each of us as we remind ourselves of the need to be vigilant in how we treat other people and to be intentional in our thanks for those who fought for us in previous wars.

Amos states that God is sickened by all the feasts and burnt offerings made to him by the people. In and of themselves, God is not against these things but he is when the people who are doing it are unjust in their lives. What good are your words and your gifts when your hearts are hardened against one another, when you allow some people to be marginalized, when the poverty all around you no longer moves you to action, when you treat some people as second class citizens and legislate to keep them oppressed? Amos pens this wonderful line: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” This is a wonderful image for justice. Amos knew as we do in our hearts that justice for all is an expectation of God and we can not talk our way out of it. Let justice roll down like waters – images here of power that can not be resisted, water rushing down and covering all in its way. Amos knew that God was not one to pick and choose justice for some and not for others and Amos knew we should do the same. Justice for all, not just for some was Amos’ great insight.

Our Ezekiel reading is another well known passage. Here we have Ezekiel dreaming about God speaking to him. God brings Ezekiel to a valley filled with dry bones. Clearly a valley of the dead, God points to it and asks Ezekiel: can these bones live once again? Ezekiel answers that only God knows the answer to the question of whether or not these bones can once again live.

Ezekiel watches as the bones suddenly move in a flurry of activity as the bones come together, flesh reappears on the bones and skin covers the bodies once again. But Ezekiel notes that there is no life, for none of the bodies are able to take a breath. Then God breathes his spirit upon the bodies and once again, the bodies stand up, a mighty host of the living.

Ezekiel’s message to his people who felt lost, alone and abandoned was that God will breathe new life in to them and once again they will stand and be alive. Do not give up hope, my people, for God is there whether you feel dried out, lost or alone. Our God breathes new life through the giving of his spirit to us, the spirit that is readily available for us all if we but invite God into our hearts and our lives.

All of our discussion to this point points us to what we are about this Sunday, the Sunday we know as Remembrance Sunday. Today, in particular, we remember the men and women who paid the supreme sacrifice in our country’s defense. The wars we remember are the Boer War, World War 1, World War 2, the Korean War and the current Afghanistan War. We also remember the men and women who served in countless countries in the role as peace keepers. In our remembering, we also recall the countless number of Canadians who served as civilians in the war effort. In so remembering, we

think of family members and friends we have known who suffered badly from the effects of the war on the body and mind.

Today is not a day to glory in war nor is it a day just to rattle our nationalism loudly. It is a sober day, a day when we try to comprehend the supreme sacrifice so many men and women made for their fellow Canadians. While we do not want war, we nevertheless pray for our troops in Afghanistan and for our troops performing peace keeping with the United Nations in so many parts of the globe.

However, we do want to remember those who have served so valiantly and selflessly with gratitude, joy and thankfulness. We included in our service today our two anthems – O Canada, our national anthem and God Save the Queen, our royal anthem. For those who say these have no place in a service of worship, I believe they do especially on Remembrance Sunday. These were the anthems our troops heard and sang as they went to war, as they gathered before and after battles, as they gave prayers of gratitude when the skirmishes of war were finally over and peace had come once again over the lands they had fought to protect and to free from tyranny.

We sing these anthems as songs of praise and not as songs which mark ourselves as under special protection from God. We are and need to be grateful for the country we have inherited as our own and the sacrifices of others that have allowed us to live in peace.

The sermon today is entitled “Memories Can Hurt.” We all know that memories can be happy and memories can be painful. On Remembrance Day, while we are grateful for the sacrifice of those who went to war, we are sobered by the thought of those whose lives were radically changed when a loved one did not come home. Parents lost their sons and daughters; men and women lost their wives and husbands; children lost their fathers and mothers; siblings lost their brothers and sisters; sweethearts lost their chosen future mate.

To me that is extremely humbling. Words are inadequate to express the gratitude and the respect for the noble actions of others that I feel on a day such as today. All we can do is affirm that their sacrifice was not and will not be in vain. We commit to live as a people who personally will do all we can to make sure others need not go through these catastrophic experiences again.

God asked Ezekiel if these dry bones can live again. We know as Ezekiel soon knew, that God can indeed make the dead rise and the dried out and the exhausted live again. That is our faith. This is our conviction. This is our certainty.

Memories can be hurtful and yet we know that memories are a reminder to us of what has been. For unless we remember, we can not remain committed to ensuring what has gone on before need never be repeated. And of course, we want to ensure that all the sacrifices of others for our safety and our way of life have not been made in vain.

Thanks be to God. Amen
Rev. Gary Magarrell