

let us set our lives to fulfilling the work of God's kingdom, drawing learning, direction and determination from them. The experience of witnesses can help us.

As we again mark Remembrance Day, I think this passage has something to say about our responsibility this week. My generation has not known the need to face an armed enemy, or to live through nightly bombings of their homes, or to live with the emotional consequences of war. We need the witness of those who have. War needs a personal face if we are to know its true cost. Whether that is the pictures of MCpl Byron Greff, or the remembrances of those who have been touched in times of past conflict. It is only when we deeply appreciate what the cost has been, in real human terms, that we can have the determination to say "never again".

So, let us remember. Let us remember the thousands who have died whose pictures never appeared in the paper. Let us remember the even greater number who lived, who still bear scars in some way. Let us remember those who never left the safety of Canada, but in their own way were among the casualties. And the next time we see on television the picture of another fallen Canadian soldier, let us pause and mourn. Let us remember that despite the witness of these people, in many ways the world has not changed, and war continues to be a human reality. So we must remember. Because if we do not, and we let the world unravel again as it did in 1914 and 1939, then we dishonour the memory of those who gave all to fix it the last time. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, may the witness of our forbears inspire the race we run.

"A Cloud of Witnesses"

Text: Hebrews 11.32 - 12.3

Date: 12 November 2017 Remembrance Sunday

Rev. Peter Coutts

MCpl Byron Greff was the last Canadian soldier to die in Afghanistan, in 2011. He was part of the PPCLI on his second tour of duty, there as a trainer for the Afghan forces. A suicide bomber drove his truck into Greff's vehicle. He was 28 years old. The news networks gave his death wide coverage, as it should. For here was a young Canadian serving as part of the United Nations action to stabilize a very troubled nation. A young man, far from home, losing his life, for the sake of a people he didn't know but needed help. He was survived by his wife and two children, one of which was his new-born daughter. His death left very real and deep impact on a wide circle of people.

War, it seems, has changed. Death seems to come only occasionally. Through our many years of involvement in Afghanistan 158 Canadians lost their lives. I wonder if some people think that this is the typical human toll of war? There are many here today who know that this is not the case, for the cost in human lives can be far greater. By comparison the same number of Canadians died every 45 minutes on the beach at Dieppe on August 19, 1942. That single, five hour battle left 1,027 dead. And that was but one moment in the Second World War.

In saying this I in no way intend to diminish contemporary losses compared to the greater losses of the major wars of the 20th century. Rather, I want to make the opposite point. In recent years every battlefield death has brought news coverage of the individual. Every death has been made personal. And I for one think that this is important to do. I was born since the Korean War. The issue for my generation is that war has no faces. We have not been witnesses to battle, and we tend not to know all that many people who were. As a result, many of us little appreciate the threats the world has faced, and the decisions made to face those threats with force, knowing full well the consequences there would be in human

lives. But that is not true for the generations who preceded us. For many of you here today, war indeed has faces: husbands and wives who served in the armed forces, brothers who did not return, uncles and fathers who to this day bear the scars of battle, comrades in arms who fell at your side while you, somehow, lived. Whether it was at the front, or on the home front, many people here were unwilling witnesses. For you, war has a face. You have your own Byron Greff.

Despite the fact that I served in the Canadian Navy for eight years, and learned something about the waging of war, it wasn't until I served in a Presbyterian Mission for the homeless in Toronto in 1985 that I really began to appreciate its cost. At Evangel Hall I met a man named Jack Thompson. He had been a Canadian soldier sent to the front in North Africa, and as he used to say, "I walked North Africa from one end to the other". After they pushed the Germans across Africa he went to Italy to do the same. But he wasn't just a soldier. He was also an artist, and as they travelled across the continents he used to sketch and occasionally paint, putting to paper a record of what he saw. He recalled often with pride the fact that General Montgomery himself had once sent for him, for he had seen Thompson's work and wanted to meet this artist. Most days that summer, Jack would tell me tales of the war -- some were funny, some were full of bravado – but the stories always stopped at Naples. He never said what happened, just, "I buried 27 men from my platoon that day". And he would cry. He was the only survivor of the day's fire fight. That's when the war ended for him—in fact that's when the world ended for him. He came home from the war to spend the rest of his life in and out of psychiatric hospitals. The cost of war came to have a face for me: the face of Jack. A greater appreciation came because of this witness to war. Jack died that summer one night sleeping in a store's doorway, forty years after the war ended for most of us.

In my first congregation I met Alice. One day she told me of the young man she'd been engaged to when the Second War broke out. He enlisted. They rushed the wedding so they could be married before he left. He never returned. She told me that the pain of his loss from her was so great that she couldn't bear the idea of

ever remarrying. The cost of war for me now also has the face of Alice, another witness to war.

When I was at Oakridge Church in London, Bob called me one day. He was in a panic. I went to see him. He was anxious because the night before he had a very vivid dream about killing a German soldier with a knife in a hand-to-hand struggle. He was distraught because he had no recollection of this happening. But the dream was so real that he couldn't tell if these recollections were real or imagined, and that worried him. Later that day he called a buddy to ask. His friend confirmed that—yes—one night on sentry duty Bob had indeed done that to protect his sleeping comrades. It seems that the act had been so disturbing to Bob that he had suppressed the memory for fifty years. Bob is another face for me in the cost of war, another witness.

Witnesses have always had an important role in the recording of history, and in the discernment of truth. When a person says, "I was there, I saw", others stop to listen, honouring their message and the insight they are able to bring. So it was in biblical times as well. Witnesses have always been held in the highest regard. Moses was followed through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan because he beheld the presence of God and brought God's message to that chosen people. The apostles were honoured because they had sat at the very feet of Christ as He taught, and because they had seen their resurrected Lord with their very own eyes. We read today from the Letter to the Hebrews, which also gives honour to witnesses: a long line of people from Abel and Enoch to Noah and Abraham right down through history to the many Jewish prophets. Examples of faith. Examples of lives well lived. Examples to us. Then the author of the Letter to the Hebrews made this point about these examples, "therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also set aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (12.1). If you would allow me to paraphrase this thought, I think the sense he is trying to get at is this: 'let us look the example of our forebears. Lean on their words. Listen to their stories. Then