

### The Cost

In my cupboard at home is a wine rack. It's not a fancy thing. It's dowel and wood pushed together, something like one of those old children's tinker toy sets. However, I keep it because it is special. It reminds me of a man in my first parish by the name of George. George was somewhat of a small-town hero. He had gone off to fight in the Second World War and he came back home with a chest full of medals. Every Remembrance Day, George was given a place of prominence at the podium. The saying around town was, "Local boy done good." The town was proud of George and his deeds overseas.

However, I don't remember George for his valour but for the high price that he paid for those medals. You see, George had come home without the lower parts of his arms. In their place were a couple of metal hooks like the type they hang meat on in the abattoir. I honour George because he had come home and had made something of his life. He didn't let his disability come between him and a fulfilling life. Carpentry was a hobby he had picked up in the pursuit of a normal life. George was a man of candour. He was a man of sincerity, and he was a man of faith. The type of guy who could be counted on to do anything around the church and in the community. However, nobody really knew the story of what had happened to George in France and what had led to the medals.

A number of years later, I was having coffee with someone and, when they found out that I had lived in that small community, they asked me if I had known George. Who didn't know George? The fellow went on to tell me that George had been his sergeant in France. One day, a grenade was thrown into the midst of their platoon. There was no time to escape the blast. George pushed the men under his command out of the way and dove on top of the grenade. This fellow was there when George's body was torn apart. He described the months of agony that George had spent in a hospital in England before eventually returning home to Canada. He knew that for years after, George continued to have pain.

This morning is what I like to think of a "bridge" Sunday in the Church. We move out of the season of Epiphany, which began right after Christmas, with the three wise men showing up on Mary and Joseph's doorstep with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then there was the Baptism of Jesus and a voice from heaven proclaiming, "This is my beloved son." Epiphany is known as "The Season of Light." The Scripture passages over the past number of weeks have alluded to the fact that the fame and popularity of Jesus had been growing and growing. Next week we move into Lent, when we begin to talk about Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. One of the ways to see today, the Sunday of Transfiguration, is a change in Jesus from popular healer to suffering servant as he begins to move towards the cross.

George's experience was something like Epiphany and Lent. The glory and the honour contrasted with the suffering and the pain. There was the public face of being the hero and a much more private face of suffering and pain as he came to cope with a new reality. Jesus has had a wonderful public ministry, but now the road towards the end begins.

"Local boy done good." It strikes me that there are a lot of slogans in our lives. "A diamond is forever." "Just do it." "Make love, not war." Our lives are bombarded with slogans. Advertising slogans. There are slogans in politics, of the right and the left. Listen for them at the time of a provincial or federal election. There are slogans in religion and economics. When you look at them, slogans carry a vague truth to them, but they seem to miss the underlying reality. "He's a local boy done good"

glosses over the fact that everybody knew there was pain and suffering involved, but nobody talked about that. In my cynical moments, I am extremely suspicious of slogans, for they can betray the truth.

There is a wonderful story in the Old Testament about King David. David was a tremendously powerful ruler and of course there were those who eyed his power and his wealth with envy. One such person was his own son, Absalom, who planned a coup. The army is sent off to capture Absalom, but instead of capturing him the soldiers kill him. They return and they are so proud to have killed the upstart. When he is told this, King David is overcome with grief. He can only think about losing his son. His heart is filled with grief. He says, "Oh my son, oh my son, that I would have died in your place." The story is brilliant because it shows us that King David gets beyond the slogans of empire and his public persona and gets down into his heart where there is caring and suffering. He shows the cost of being a parent.

The story doesn't end there. Even in those days, those in power had to think about their public persona. David's PR man comes along and chastises the king. "What are you doing? How do you think the nation will feel if they see the king acting like that? You put on a public face and go out there on the royal balcony and thank those soldiers for what they have done. Cover up your pain and get on with the business of being a king. Otherwise people will lose faith and trust in you."

I think this is a powerful story because it speaks to the core of human existence. We are strange mixtures. You might spend your night tossing and turning, crying, fretting over something, hurt to the very core of your being, but in the morning you have to get up and put on your public face and get on with things and go through your paces again. We are very good at putting on the façade of the public face, so good we become experts at this masquerade.

Lent is a time for us to be suspicious of the masquerade of public personas and the slogans in life. Like "Peace through strength," or "Western technology will save the world," or "Our form of democracy is the only way." There are germs of truth in each one, but they are only bits of the truth. These slogans, these ideas, cover over the pain and the hurt. When you think of it, they cover over some of the things we value most like to hurt one another is wrong, or our technology can make a mess of the planet, or promoting our democracy or our religion leads us into a terrible game of one-upmanship around the globe.

King David didn't succumb to the slogans or the public pressure. Neither did Jesus. The people had their slogans for Jesus: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna!" "Save us, Jesus!" There was tremendous pressure on him to reveal himself as the Messiah. The people so desperately wanted a saviour to rescue them from the tyranny of the invading Roman forces. An easy solution to their problems. No. In Lent, Jesus takes a turn. No longer the popular figure, he becomes the one who suffers. However, it is his suffering which leads him to become truly human.

So one day a rich young man comes to Jesus and asks him what he should do with his life. Jesus gives him all of the pat answers like making sure you help support the poor and giving a certain portion of money to the temple. The young man says that he's done all of this yet he still hasn't found fulfillment in life. It is because Jesus has not embraced the slogans of life that he is able to say to the young man that if he really wants to find out what it is to be human and to be fully alive then he has to forget all of the slogans in life, slogans that tell him his wealth is the be-all and end-all in life, and to detach himself

from that wealth. To suffer a little bit because he might not have it all. That young man turned away from Jesus because, we are told, he had just too much stuff to get beyond the slogans in life.

This coming Lent, I ask you to think of the slogans by which you organize your life. Ask yourself what they are covering over in your life? Think about Jesus, who is transformed from one who had power, stature in his ministry, to one who suffers the way of the cross. I invite you to think about the public life of our own community and country with its surge towards power and greed and our juggling act of arms and diplomacy and our tendency to organize people into friends and enemies.

At the same time, when looking at your own life, realize that Jesus too went through human suffering and pain. Jesus was truly human. Lent reminds us that Jesus knew what it was to live our lives. By acknowledging our own human condition - some might call it a confession that our lives are not perfect - then and only then will we find what it is to be truly human.

When we do so, is there a different way for us to be in the world? Is there a way for us to be in the world that somehow takes into account not only our pain and our hurt but also the pain and hurt of others? Is there a way of living our lives that acknowledges all people everywhere who, just as we do, live and die, hope and despair, and laugh and cry?

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