

Sunday 21 October, 2018

A sermon preached by the Revd Kate Lord, Chaplain, Royal Australian Navy, at the annual Seafarers Service:

Reading: *Job 38 : 1-11, Mark 10 : 35-45*

In the name of our Trinitarian God. Amen.

Last month, I watched the film *Wonder Woman* for the first time. I won't give too many spoilers for those of you who are still looking forward to seeing it. *Wonder Woman* starts off as a child named Diana, who grows up on an island of female Amazonian warriors. The island is protected by Zeus, who causes a shroud of fog to make it invisible to the outside world. The first contact that Diana has with the outside world is when a plane crashes through the fog and into the ocean near the island. After rescuing the pilot, Diana learns about the war that is going on in the world outside. She chooses to leave her idyllic home to go and save people from the horrors of the First World War. You see, Diana believes the mythology that she has been taught as a child: that Ares is the god of war, who was thrown down from Mount Olympus to earth, where he wreaks war and havoc. And she believes that killing him will stop the war.

I won't tell you about all the action that goes on in the middle of the film, but the penultimate scene shows *Wonder Woman* facing Ares in a fierce battle. Ares tries to convince Diana to join him in his work, which is to keep humanity at war. He says of people, "They have always been and always will be weak, cruel, selfish; capable of the greatest horrors. All I ever wanted was for the gods to see how evil my father's creation was. They do not deserve our help: they only deserve destruction." And Diana sees evidence of this for herself as she travels through a Europe in the grip of World War One. She is distressed at the sight of the hundreds of wounded, and at the plight of thousands of refugees, and observes, "They were killing each other. Killing people they cannot see."

But Diana also sees the soldiers risking their own safety to perform heroic actions that will save their friends, and hopefully end the war. She experiences love and friendship, and witnesses the simple joys of sharing food and drink, of singing and dancing together. So she says to Ares, "You're wrong about them. They're everything you say, but so much more."

I think that this is a fascinating dichotomy, and accurately describes what we human beings are. We only have to look at today's reading from Mark's gospel ~ where James and John ask Jesus to seat one of them at his right and the other at his left in his glory ~ to see that humans have always been the same: we grasp at power and prestige, at wealth and fame. And in so doing, we backstab and fight, we lord it over others and become greedy, we draw up borders between ourselves, and wage wars over land and oil and other resources. We see the results of such behaviour throughout society: in the detention of refugees and their

children offshore, in the exorbitant cost of petrol, in house prices that our children will never be able to afford, in bickering between politicians, in terrorism, in the ravaging of the Earth, and in dismissive attitudes towards climate change.

Ten years ago, as part of my theological studies, I undertook a class trip to visit Karen refugees on the Thai---Burmese border. There was one day in Mae Sot that was particularly difficult. In the morning, our group visited the Karen Women's Association, where we heard from the women about the atrocities that are committed in their villages by the Myanmar military forces. It was devastating to sit with the women while they told their stories and cried.

In the afternoon, we visited the Association for the Assistance of Political Prisoners. We heard from the men who had been taken as prisoners from their villages, and been incarcerated and tortured for varying periods of time before they escaped or were released.

The museum that they had set up was filled with models of the prison and photos of the abuses to which the men were subjected.

At the end of that day, one of the younger men in my class asked me if I wanted to go for a drink, to which I replied emphatically that I did! We went out for coffee, and sat in silence for some time, before he said to me, "Today I faced what I am capable of doing." I think that this illustrates my point: within each of us is the capacity to do great evil. But there is also the capacity to do great good.

There is a great scene in "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix", where Harry is talking to his godfather. Harry has been feeling very angry, and having visions of the evil Lord Voldemort committing crimes, and he worries that there is something wrong with him. His godfather says, "You're not a bad person. You're a very good person, who bad things have happened to... We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are."

Wonder Woman comes to the same conclusion. She says of humans, "I glimpsed a darkness that lives within their light, and learned that inside every one of them, there will always be both. A choice each one must make for themselves; something no hero will ever defeat."

In today's reading we hear that even the disciples who live with Jesus, who spend every day watching his actions and hearing him speak, are still unable to make the best choice.

They argue amongst themselves about who is the greatest, and seek positions of power.

This is a microcosm of the whole story of the Bible. Since humans have always fought over power and wealth and land, God comes to humanity in many ways over many centuries, and calls us to love and serve one another, to care for the last and the least among us. The

prophets called the people of Israel to social justice, including the welcoming of refugees, but few took notice of their message. In the end, God comes among us as a human being, in the person of Jesus, to demonstrate to us how to love one another without seeking to grasp or control. Today, Jesus reminds his disciples of this basic message: that whoever wishes to be greatest must become the servant of others; that he himself comes, not to be served, but to give his life in love for others.

Even the incarnation of Christ in the person of Jesus shows us the great dignity that is inherent in being human. Being human is so worthwhile, so full of the potential for good, that God chooses to become human. Being a baby, a child, a teenager, an adult, are experiences so worthy to be embraced that even God does it. In the person of Jesus, we see what it means to be generous and hospitable, to be welcoming of those who are poor, sick or marginalised. He talks about centurions, the hated foreign soldiers who enforced the Roman laws, and upholds them as exemplars of faith. He spends his time hanging around fishermen and their boats. Not only does he calm the stormy seas that make even experienced sailors nervous, but he also speaks into their fears as they navigate their way through life. Jesus is the embodiment of love, because God is love.

I spoke with several friends during the week as I prepared what I was going to say today. I had one friend remind me that Wonder Woman was not actually present during the First World War, despite the fact that the film depicts Diana's defeat of Ares as the event that brings about the Armistice. But the message of the film ~ that heroism also dwells in the heart of humanity ~ holds true. We all know of real stories of heroism from that time. Only two days ago I was at Brighton Cemetery, blessing a commemorative plaque that has been placed on the grave of Vice Admiral William Creswell, the Father of the Royal Australian Navy. It was his persistence in advocating for the necessity for Australia to have its own Navy, that saw our newly federated country acquire one battle cruiser, three unarmoured cruisers, six destroyers and three submarines. The new ships sailed into Sydney Harbour less than twelve months before the outbreak of World War One. The new Australian fleet proved to be the strongest Commonwealth naval force in the Pacific, and it was overseen by Admiral Creswell, who was made the First Naval Member of the Australian Naval Board, the equivalent of today's Chief of Navy.

The Navy of today comprises nearly 23,000 people, both permanent and reserve forces. These are ordinary people doing extraordinary things. That is all heroes ever have been. Likewise, the women and men who sail our merchant vessels are the heroes that allow Australians both to enjoy the imports we purchase from other parts of the world, and to share the prosperity we enjoy as a result of our exports. As people of an island nation, we rely on the sea and those who sail upon it, for our safety and supply lines. Seafaring is a life that requires sacrifice ~ of the comforts of home and the joys of family life ~ but it is a sacrifice that is borne of great love for our fellow human beings, and a desire to serve our nation.



So as we approach the one hundredth anniversary of Armistice Day, the end of World War One, it is possible to get caught up in the memory of the horrors of war. I think that it is important always to remember that out of tragedy steps the best of humanity: courage, compassion, loyalty, heroism. Many people point to war and other tragedies of human making and ask, "How can there be a God who lets such things happen?" But God is not a distant being who runs the world by remote control, without a care for the outcome.

Rather, God steps onto the human stage, in human form. Jesus journeys alongside us, and shows what it is to be the best, the fullness of humanity. Christ gifts us with the Holy Spirit to help us discern darkness from light, and to love and comfort us through the storms of life. If we ever look at the world around us, or at the world within each of us, and wonder if any of us deserves such a gift, remember that the words of Diana, Wonder Woman, echo the message of the gospel: "It's not about 'deserve'. It's about what you believe. And I believe in love."

The Lord be with you.