

Sermon: Greater than the Former

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, on Remembrance Sunday, Nov. 6, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, peace of the Lord be with you. We are gathered here, on this Remembrance Sunday, as the congregation of St. Giles, which has, since 1940, been the regimental church of the Cameron Highlanders. We are gathered here today to remember the supreme sacrifice of the four members of Zion, the eleven members of St. Giles, and the countless other brave soldiers of Canada who served their country at the cost of their lives. We are gathered here today to remember an era, which some may categorized as bygone, where the virtues of duty and honour are valued above all.

As we are gathered here today, I am curious. I want to direct this following question to those who are still active in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF): How is moral among the troops? How is moral among the men and women who are currently serving in the CAF?

I don't ask this question lightly or frivolously. I ask it because of a recent report by the Global News, citing comments made by Anita Anand, the Minister of National Defence, that military recruitment issues continue to plaque the CAF.

Two ongoing problems attributed by the report are the shuttered recruiting and training centres due to COVID-19, and what the report describes as the 'cultural reckoning' for the military due to allegations of sexual misconduct against top commanders and officers. It would appear the series of negative news coverage have not only touched the nerves of the Canadian public, they are having a measurable impact on the willingness of men and women to want to serve in the military.

This is coming at a time when the Canadian Armed Forces are increasingly being called upon for both international deployments (in Poland, Latvia, and other NATO countries neighbouring Ukraine), and for domestic disaster reliefs (such as tropical storm Fiona, and pandemic related medical assistance).

I am concerned about the moral among the troops. I am concerned for the active service members about how they see themselves, and how they see the chain of command in CAF. When we are gathered here today, to remember the former glory of the Canadian Armed Forces, I admit that I have more concerned for the current crop of soldiers and the future generations to come. Will the current and future generations be a shadow of the former, consigned to remember only the glory of the past? Or will they find a way forward, to be renewed and transformed, to become **greater than the former?**

The words of Prophet Haggai in today's Scripture reading is instructive. Haggai prophesied in the time of post-exile, when the Israelites or more precisely when the Judeans were permitted to return to their homeland under the Persian rule during the 6th century BCE. Under the governorship of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and the high priesthood of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the returnees were commanded by the Lord God, to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Life was hard for the returnees. Rebuilding their shattered lives in the ruin city was already a struggle, and now they had to construct the temple of the Lord, with meagre materials and weakly hands. Tried as they might, the returnees simply could not muster what was needed to match the former glory of Solomon's temple. In fact, when the second temple was finally 'finished', the shabby nature of that edifice was simply tear inducing, not tears of joy but of lament, particularly for those who had seen, who still remember the glory of the former. Thus leading to the rhetorical questions by Haggai the prophet, "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?"

However, the Lord God did not leave the people there to lament. Speaking through the prophet, God commands the governor, the high priest and all the people of the land to take courage, to work, for the Lord God is with them, and the Lord of hosts, God of angel armies abides among them. God promises that in a little while, God will shake the heavens, the earth, the sea, the dry land and all the nations shall be shaken also. The house of the Lord shall be rebuilt once again in splendour, and its glory shall be **greater than the former.**

Just so we are clear, the house that Haggai referred to is not a physical house, but a spiritual one. The one that we have seen as God's covenant renewed and fulfilled in and through God's only begotten Son

Jesus Christ, our Lord and saviour. And His kingdom is without end, forever and ever, Amen.

Now, I am quite aware that Haggai was not speaking directly to men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces, and God's promise of the future glory for the house of God, cannot be simply transposed to project onto the future of CAF. I am also quite aware of the multicultural nature of Canada, and that CAF personnels are comprised of many religious beliefs, including those who are agnostic and those who simply do not have faith.

However, deep within CAF's own "fundamental beliefs" lies the concept of "unlimited liability", which is explained in the 2009 manual entitled *Duty with Honour*. Unlimited liability dictates that CAF members are "subject to being lawfully ordered into harm's way under conditions that could lead to the loss of their lives."

The most obvious application is when soldiers are ordered into battle, but there are other less obvious ones, like when CAF medical and support personnels were asked, at the height of COVID-19 pandemic, to takeover long term care homes in Quebec and Ontario. They did so with such bravery and professionalism that truly is admirable, especially given the context of that time when most of us were sheltering in place, cowering under the fear of a relatively unknown and deadly respiratory viral contagion.

By accepting unlimited liability, one also accepts, citing the 2009 manual "the notion of service before self, extending its meaning beyond merely enduring inconvenience or great hardship. It is an attitude associated with the military professional's philosophy of service."

Now allow me to push this philosophical notion of unlimited liability in a theological direction, since that is what my profession as an ordained minister of the Gospel calls for. Isn't this unlimited liability of the CAF remarkably similar to the central tenet of Christianity, that Jesus Christ submitted under the will of God, was lawfully ordered into harm's way, in service to the whole of humanity, that ultimately led to his death, that is death on the cross? In so doing, the love of God for humanity, for the entirety of God's creation is thus revealed. For those of us who subscribe to this faith, we are thus covenanted to love God with all our hearts, with all our mind, with all our strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

It is by such an understanding of both the unlimited liability of the CAF, and the new covenant of the Christian love, that the words of Prophet

Haggai become possible, that the latter splendour of this house, this proud institution of the CAF, shall be **greater than the former**.

But there is one missing piece, and I am referring to the words of the Apostle John, in 1 John 2, his instruction to both fathers (meaning those with authority) and young people (meaning those who are still growing and aspiring to be more). John, being the last one of the twelve disciples of Jesus alive at that time, spoke with much wisdom and foresight, to the community of faith gathered in the name of Jesus. This is what John said some two thousand years ago, and is also saying to all of us today as well,

“Do not love the world or the things in the world.
The love of the Father is not in those who love the world,
for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh,
the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—
comes not from the Father but from the world.
And the world and its desire are passing away,
but those who do the will of God abide forever.” (1 John 2:15-17)

With that said, I would like to invite you to stand, and to respond in unison the Living Faith 8.5.1-3, as printed in the bulletin.

Confessional Response: Living Faith 8.5.1-3

Christ, the Prince of Peace,
calls his followers to seek peace in the world.

We know that nations have fought in self-defense
and that war, at times, may be unavoidable.
But the tragic evil that comes with war,
the slaughter of men, women, and children
must rouse us to work for peace.

We protest against the world arms race
that diminishes our ability to fight
hunger, ignorance, poverty and disease.
We affirm that God is at work
when people are ashamed of the inhumanity of war
and work for peace with justice.

We pray for peace to him who is the Prince of Peace.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayers of the People

(Today's prayer is taken from the prayer of General Douglas MacArthur, who was stationed in Australia during World War 2, and acting as the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Southwest Pacific Area. He penned this prayer for his only son, Arthur, but for today's purpose, I have taken the liberty to modify references to a son, into 'sons and daughters'.)

Build me sons and daughters, O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when they are weak and brave enough to face themselves when they are afraid; those who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat, and humble and gentle in victory.

Build me sons and daughters whose wishes will not take the place of deeds; those who will know Thee—and that to know themselves is the foundation stone of knowledge. Lead them, I pray, not in the path of ease and comfort, but under the stress and spur of difficulties and challenge. Here let them learn to stand up in the storm; here let them learn compassion for those who fail.

Build me sons and daughters whose heart will be clear, whose goal will be high; sons and daughters who will master themselves before they seek to master others; sons and daughters who will reach into the future, yet never forget the past.

And after all these things are theirs, add, I pray, enough of a sense of humour, so that they may always be serious, yet never take themselves too seriously. Give them humility, so that they may always remember the simplicity of true greatness, the open mind of true wisdom, and the weakness of true strength. Then I, their father will dare to whisper, "I have not lived in vain." **Amen.**