What a Piece of Work is Man?

Psalm 8

May 25, 2014
[First preached May 30, 2010]
Memorial Day Observance

Mark S. Bollwinkel

Next to the Westminster Bridge and the house of Parliament in London, England is a bronze statue of Boudica, warrior queen of an armed rebellion against the Roman legions colonizing Great Britain in 62 CE. Among her victories was the defeat of the garrison in what would become London, which she and her warriors burned to the ground.

Centuries later, her legend was romanticized by Queen Victoria who took her as a namesake. Poems, songs and plays were written about Boudica’s heroism and bravery. Ships, cities and buildings were named after her. In 1905, the statue commissioned by Prince Albert, Victoria’s husband, was placed next to the British seat of government with a verse from a poem inscribed at its base, comparing the British Empire to the greatness of the Roman:

Regions Caesar never knew
Thy Prosperity shall sway

In a profound irony that only human history can bring, while colonizing a third of the world, Queen Victoria of England idolized a rebel who fought against foreign colonizers by burning to the ground the very city in which her memorial now stands.

What and how we remember our heroes says much more about us than it does about them!

Shakespeare knew this to be true.

In the back drop of the Nine Year War with Ireland and all of the intrigue surrounding the end of the reign of Elizabeth I at the end of the 16th century, William Shakespeare writes a tragedy of epic proportions around a fictional fallen hero named Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Driven to insane revenge by the murder of his father, the King by his uncle, who soon after weds Hamlet’s mother the Queen, Shakespeare’s play profoundly illustrates the madness of power and greed at all human levels;
international, personal and deeply spiritual. By the end of the play all the
main characters are dead and the audience is left to ponder the meaning
of life itself.

In Act II, Scene ii, two friends named Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are
charged with accompanying Hamlet to England with secret instructions to
arrange for his death. Pretending concern, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
ask Hamlet how he is holding up with the death of his father and the taking
of his throne and queen by his murderous uncle. Shakespeare has
Hamlet reply with bitter sarcasm and irony:

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in
faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action
how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the
world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this
quintessence of dust? (Hamlet Act II, scene ii (287-298))

Can you hear the echo of our Hebrew scripture lesson today from Psalm 8
in Hamlet’s soliloquy?

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet….

Both pieces of literature suggest that God is active and alive in the human
destiny; that the earth and creation itself is inspired and transcendent. Yet
the two voices could not be more different. One rejoices at the prospect.
One grieves the consequences of people who refuse to live up to such
holy calling. One is written in the comfort of abstraction by theologians.
The other is written by one who had more than his share of suffering and
disappointment in the human condition.

In the first chapter of the book of Genesis it is suggested we are created in
the image and likeness of God, that we are the children of God (1:27). In
the very next chapters we lie, betray and murder.
“What a piece of work is man!” We may be crowned with glory and honor or all that we strive and hope for can be left as nothing more than dust. And the choice is always ours.

Nowhere is the dilemma more profound than when it comes to war.

Christians have long debated the morality of war. The Bible gives us mixed messages. Some of the faithful have argued for a pacifist stance, refuting any justification for violence, citing Jesus’ many teachings on the subject. Some of the faithful, citing Hebrew Scripture in particular, will insist that God sends the good out to war against the evil using any violent means necessary to guarantee victory for the righteous. Our Psalm this morning begins, "...you [O God] have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger."

Over the centuries still others have crafted a “just war theory.” It suggests that to stand by and do nothing while evil ones plot and carry out violence on the innocent means that the good are in complicity with that evil. Violence in measured response, strictly in self-defense, is justified as a last resort to stop greater violence. Those “faithful warriors” who put on a police or military uniform and are daily willing to lay down their lives for others are living by that ethic (John 15:12-13, Romans 5:7) and deserve our greatest respect. Their valor should only be spent when there is no other alternative.

While accepting the Nobel Prize for peace, President Jimmy Carter said, “War may be a necessary evil, but it is always an evil” (December 10, 2002). Throughout history war rarely solves anything and in most cases makes things much worse. Yet there come times when good people have no other option but to fight.

Like most of his generation, my father rarely talked about his World War II experience. As a 19 year old Army infantry man, his unit would follow the Marines after they took each Pacific Island back from the Japanese Imperial Army; from Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima to Okinawa. His platoon was charged with going into each tunnel and cave to find the last remaining enemy. We can only imagine what he and his buddies found there. It wasn't until last month as we inured his remains at the new Dixon National Cemetery that we learned from the young Army Captain reading out his military record that my father had earned three Bronze Stars for valor in combat. He never told us about that.
It is the legacy of those men and women who were willing to sacrifice everything to defeat totalitarian fascism in Europe and Asia during World War II that insured the relative freedom and prosperity we now enjoy.

What and how we remember our heroes says much more about us than it does about them!

On one of the walls of the World War II Memorial in Washington DC are quotes from this poem by Archibald MacLeish:

The young dead solders do not speak.
Nevertheless they are heard in the still houses.
(Who has not heard them?) They say,
We were young. We have died. Remember us.
They say,
We have done what we could
But until it is finished it is not done.
They say,
We have given our lives
But until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave.
They say,
Our deaths are not ours,
They are yours,
They will mean what you make them.
They say,
Whether our lives, and our deaths were for peace and a new hope
Or for nothing
We cannot say.
It is you who must say this.
They say,
We leave you our deaths,
Give them their meaning.

(The Human Season, selected poems 1926-1972, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1972.)

What meaning have we given our fallen heroes? If we best honor the legacy of their sacrifices by what we do with this world they have left for us, how have we memorialized them?

It is fitting and good that we erect memorials, wave flags and march in parades, of course. But our lasting tribute to the fallen is how we live and the future we build for their, and our, children.
In January 1945 at the end of what is called the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes forest bordering Germany -- where Carol Damonte’s father fought and was wounded -- Maj. Roy Creek of the 507th Army Rangers, one of the heroes of D-Day, met two aid men carrying a severely wounded paratrooper back to an aid station. Creek took his hand to give him encouragement. The trooper asked, “Major, did I do OK?” To which he replied, “You did fine, son.” But as they carried him away, Creek noticed for the first time that one of his legs was missing. “I dropped the first tear for him as they disappeared in the trees. Through the fifty years since, I still continue to fight the tears when I’ve thought of him and so many others like him. Those are the true heroes of the war. I hope and pray that we never fight another one.” (Steven Ambrose, Citizen Soldiers, Touchstone, 1997, p. 390)

Since World War II, have we built a monument to the justice, economic development, cultural tolerance and investment in education that would ensure the peace for which Maj. Creek prayed?

Since World War II 102,310 US men and women have died in combat operations, including 6,717 dead and 50,897 wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11. (Wikipedia).

What monument could possibly be fitting to honor their sacrifices and the sacrifices of their families for the security we now count on? Bronze, marble, poetic words, rousing hymns seem paltry compared to the priceless gift they have given us.

Our lasting tribute to the fallen is how we live and the future we build for their, and our, children.

What a piece of work is man? How noble in reason. How infinite in faculty. How like the children of God!

Whether our legacy be glory or dust is entirely in our hands.

    Amen.