

The Wisdom of Widows by Rev. Cathy Russell

1 Kings 17:8-24, Mark 12:38-44

Nov 7, 2010 Remembrance Sunday

(SLIDE #1 HMS AUDACITY)

December 14, 1941. A convoy of supply ships sets sail from Gibraltar off the coast of Spain, for Great Britain. Among those escorting the convoy is Her Majesty's Ship *Audacity*, a small escort carrier. German U boats become aware of the convoy a day or two after it launches, and begins stalking the ships. A total of five u-boats join the hunt, although one is sunk on Dec 17. On the evening of Dec 21, the *Audacity* draws off, faking an attack in order to draw the U boats away from the convoy. Unfortunately, the British believe that the attack is real and send snowflake flares blazing up into the dark sky. The *Audacity* is suddenly illuminated and revealed to be alone. Realising their mistake, other British ships race to her aid, but they will be too late. At 10:10 pm, a torpedo from U-boat 751 hits the *Audacity's* engine room, knocking out her steering, and causing water to come flooding into the ship. Two more torpedoes from the u-boat cause an explosion of aviation fuel, blowing off the ship's bow. The *Audacity* sinks in 10 minutes, taking her eight aircraft with her.

(SLIDE #2 JAMES RUSSELL)

Although some of the crew are rescued, 73 men lose their lives. Among them is my paternal grandfather Petty Officer James Cameron Russell.

Surviving James is his wife Elsie Chambers and their two boys, Morris who is two and a half, and Mervyn, my father, who is just 17 months. Both of James Russell's sons will

grow up to have no living memory of their father. Although she hears over the BBC that the *Audacity* has been sunk, Elsie's first warning that Jim is not among the survivors comes from her best friend, who has a dream in which she sees, plain as day, Jim's sailor's cap floating on the surface of the sea. The official notice, when it does come says simply "Missing presumed dead". Nothing of Jim is ever recovered.

We Honour the Sacrifice of our War Dead

My grandfather like thousands of others gave his life, willingly, for King and country, for freedom from the fascist forces that had swept across Europe and threatened to conquer Great Britain. He is among those we pause to remember and honour at this time each year, even as the ranks of those who were lucky enough to survive his war grows ever frailer and fewer. For the last six years, we have been reminded each week of the sacrifice of our Canadian soldiers as their bodies are repatriated from Afghanistan. Whatever we think of war in general or any war in particular, most of us feel a duty to honour this tremendous sacrifice, made willingly, and courageously, out of a sense of duty and a desire to serve a higher purpose. The media, our government, our veterans all work hard to ensure that we never take for granted those who died these sacrificial deaths. We wear the poppy, we lay wreaths at monuments in virtually every town across this enormous country, we stand on overpasses waving flags and saluting when the bodies of our fallen men and women come home. All of this is meaningful, all of it important.

We Fail to Honour the Sacrifice of the Survivors

(SLIDE #3 YOUNG ELSIE CHAMBERS)

But what about the sacrifices of those the dead leave behind- those like my grandmother, who, despite their own shattering loss and grief, have had to carry on with the task of living, of providing for and raising families without the support of their spouses? After Jim's death, Elsie went back out to work, cleaning houses on her hands and knees to support the three of them. Bombing raids on the south coast of England destroyed two of their wartime homes. If they hadn't been visiting with family on the second occasion, they would all have been killed by the blast that reduced their house to rubble, and I would not be here today. Money was very tight, and so many things including meat, sugar, tea, butter and cheese were rationed. The daily struggle to survive was regularly followed by the nightmare of bombing raids in the dark. But they got through it, thanks in part to luck, and support from family, but mostly thanks to Elsie who, despite her diminutive size, proved to be a tower of strength for the sake of her children.

Petty Officer James Russell made the greatest of all sacrifices- but his sacrifice ended Dec 21, 1941, the day he was lost at sea. On that same day, Elsie's *life* of sacrifice truly began. Yet our awareness and appreciation for women like her, our appreciation of their sacrifice, their sense of duty, their courage and their selflessness is so low by comparison. Our attention is so focused on the drama of the uniforms, the gleaming guns, the awesome planes, ships and LAVs, that we just don't see the widows and orphans left in their wake- they are, as it were, off our radar.

Widows Have Always Been Partly Invisible

Those who recorded the Jewish law thousands of years ago knew that widows could easily become invisible. Time and again, in books like Deuteronomy and Isaiah, Israel is reminded of God's command to provide for, include, and do right by widows, orphans

and the resident aliens among them- all those who lived at the margins of their society. And we know that we only need reminders for those things which we are likely to forget.

Certainly the widow of Zarephath has been forgotten. So desperate is her circumstance that she is about to prepare the last remaining food in her house for herself and her son, fully expecting that death is just around the corner. How did she reach that place- why did things get so bad? Well, she was off the radar, no one saw her, no one appreciated her courageous struggle to keep herself and her boy alive, no one acted on God's commands to care for her as a vulnerable person. It gets worse in our gospel reading in which Jesus accuses, the scribes, the religious elite of Israel, of not only failing to follow God's commands to care for widows, but of actually scheming to get their hands on their houses! That is an explosive accusation of religious hypocrisy and injustice, against a powerful class of people used to being treated with respect and deference by all. But Jesus is not the least afraid to make it, because Jesus sees people with kingdom eyes.

God Sees the Widows

God doesn't see the way people do- God does not get distracted by powerful people, with their riches and their important positions. God sees past all our outer trappings to the inside of the human heart- God sees what motivates us, what and who we care about most. And this is the thing that really struck me about our scriptures this week- God sees the widows. God sees them, acknowledges them and blesses their sacrificial living. I said that no one saw the widow of Zarephath- well God saw her. God saw her, and God knew her to be a good person, a loving mother, a faithful person, ready to trust in the promises of God's prophet. That's why God sent Elijah to her, because God saw

her and knew that in the face of Elijah's need she would act sacrificially, courageously, selflessly, day after day after day.

In the same way, Jesus sees the widow in the temple. No one else noticed her, or if they did, they probably didn't give her a second thought- just another widow, just another insignificant person making a virtually insignificant offering- only two copper coins. But Jesus sees her and he sees that her offering is a sacrificial act- an act of courage, of faith, of selflessness, because as vulnerable as she already is, she makes herself even more vulnerable by giving to God all her resources- all that she has to live on. The widow is living a life of sacrifice, willingly, courageously, faithfully, and while she may be off the radar of most of us, God sees her- Jesus sees her and calls her blessed. In fact Jesus showers some of the highest praise you will ever hear drop from his lips, on this nameless, impoverished widow.

(SLIDE #4 ELISE DAD AND AUNTY MARJORIE)

My grandmother raised her two sons successfully- both of them went on to university, a first for both sides of the family. She even re-married when my dad was a pre-teen, and enjoyed a long, happy marriage to George Chambers, the man my brother and I knew and loved as grandpa. But the war and the loss of Jim, her great love, took its toll. Her innate strength developed into a kind of emotional toughness that did not allow for much in the way of verbal or physical affection, even towards her own children or grandchildren. I respected my grandmother, I admired her tremendously, and I loved her. But we were never close. That frustrated me for a long time until, as I reached adulthood, I began to see that the scars left on her heart just would not allow for the kind of warmth from her that I so wanted. I began to see why she was who she was.

(SLIDE #5 MEMORIAL TO WIDOWS AND ORPHANS)

Seeing Our Way to Peace on Earth

We have built monuments in hundreds of towns across this huge country, and hundreds more around the world to commemorate those who died in war. Monuments like this one in Australia which commemorate the survivors are far fewer in number. But perhaps we, the next generations, might give them a different legacy, one not marked by marble or bronze, but by a change in our hearts, and in our vision. If we could see the widows and widowers, the orphans and the refugees with kingdom eyes; if we could honour their sacrificial lives as much as we honour our soldier's sacrificial deaths, maybe then there would be no more war anywhere on this earth. If we could, like Elijah and Jesus, apprehend and learn from the wisdom of widows- their courage, their sense of duty, their selflessness, their love, we would come a lot closer to a peaceful and blessed earth for all. May God make it truly so. Thanks Be to God, AMEN.