"Private Sorrow Becomes Public Property": Canadian Anglican Sermons and the Second Battle of Ypres, May 1915

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> The cup of anguish and sorrow has been put to the lips of the Canadian people and we must try and drink this cup with calmness, self-control, prayerful love for our own, courage, endurance, and Christian faith in the life to come. We are made to realize the deeper unity of the whole Dominion. Private sorrow has become public property and it calls for a fresh determination to destroy the machine of scientific frightfulness. Without the shedding of blood there can be no deepening of national life and no real progress. We must learn to suffer hardship, bereavement, and sorrow with a deep and stern joy.[1]

As he stood in the pulpit of Toronto's St. Paul's church and spoke these words, Archdeacon Henry John Cody was facing people that were, for the first time, experiencing the human cost of being at war. It was 2 May 1915 – the fifth Sunday in Eastertide – and the Great War was nine months old. On 22 April 1915, barely more than a week earlier, the Canadian contingent had faced history's first successful gas attack at Ypres. It had been their first sustained combat operation, their baptism by fire, and the extent of the casualties they had suffered were being felt in homes across the Dominion as telegrams were delivered to next-of-kin and newspapers printed casualty lists.

In his 1968 article on Canadian Methodists and the First World War, historian J.M. Bliss suggested that only the churches possessed the

necessary ideological resources to comfort the population during the critical period of the war. He considers it questionable whether Canadians could have weathered the emotional upheaval caused by the war without the comfort and sustaining belief provided by the churches.[2] Although I do not intend to engage this thesis in this short essay, the idea is nonetheless one which is helpful. The movement in much modern historiography away from top-down histories can obscure the importance of messages being received from those in positions of authority. The common assumption by historians has been that clerical support for the war was jingoistic, idealistic, and ill-informed. It is my hope to provide a more nuanced view of the message that Anglican congregations were receiving from their priests and to begin to show why the ideological resources of the churches may have been so important. The paper that follows is divided into two sections. The first, and longest, deals with the story of the Second Battles of Ypres as it played itself out in Canadian Anglican churches in the spring of 1915. The second section is a reflection on the first, attempting briefly to establish a rhetorical context and inquiring as to what the story can tell us about Canadian identity and society during the first year of the Great War.

What is conventionally known as the Second Battles of Ypres began the evening of Thursday, 22 April 1915, when German troops released chlorine gas on trenches being held by Canadian and French colonial troops. As the African troops fled or were overcome, it fell to the Canadians to plug the gap in the line and prevent the Germans from exploiting the situation.[3] That same Thursday, readers of the evening edition of Toronto's *The Globe* newspaper could read headlines announcing "British Holding Fast in Desperate Struggle," but it would take two days for further details about the situation that had been faced by the Canadian soldiers at the front to filter back to Canadians at home.[4] As fighting continued in Flanders, headlines such as "Desperate Fighting Is in Progress in Flanders / Poisonous Gases Are Used by the Enemy" did little to ease people's worries.[5] Just as they had in August, nine months earlier, when they were waiting to hear if war had been declared, people congregated at newspaper offices across the country, this time desperate to hear the latest news from Belgium and learn the fate of individual soldiers. They had been warned to expect heavy casualties. But how many? And who? There would be no further news until Monday.

Speaking at Montreal's St. Matthias' church on that tense Sunday, 25 April, John Cragg Farthing, Bishop of Montreal, said,

> This is a time of crisis, not only in the Empire, the physical struggle taking place in Europe, but also in the church. We are all suffering in the present war, but what is pressing upon my mind . . . is the question, "What if this suffering should be in vain? What if people turn a deaf ear to God, and when the war is over go back to worldliness . . . and unrighteousness?"[6]

While Farthing's main subject were allegations of graft and war-profiteering coming out of Ottawa, his question 'What if this suffering should be in vain?' was asked at precisely the time when many were waiting anxiously, knowing that there had been a battle but not yet knowing the number of dead and wounded. Farthing's answer, that the suffering would bear fruit if people were to remain righteous and turned toward God – the "deepening of national life" that was spoken of by Cody – is a dominant theme in sermons from this early period of the war. Britain, and through it the Empire, was engaged in a righteous war, a war that needed to be waged by a righteous people. As one of the collects authorized for special use in the war's first days entreats:

> Grant that, in the present time of warfare and distress of nations, our people may know thy presence, and obey thy will: Remove from us arrogance and feebleness; give us courage and loyalty, tranquility and self-control, that we may accomplish that which thou gavest us to do, and endure that which thou givest us to bear.[7]

It was believed that the war, with its attendant suffering and required self-sacrifice, would bring Canadians to realize their national faults and draw people closer to God.

On Monday, 26 April, the same day Canadian troops were withdrawn from the firing line in Flanders, the first list of officer casualties was released. It contained sixty-eight names.[8] New lists, containing further names, continued to be released daily, and estimates of the total number of casualties that had been suffered were revised dramatically upward as the week went on and more information became available. On Wednesday, 28 April, the projected total was two thousand casualties.[9] The full list would not be available for a further week, and the official tally would be nearly six thousand dead, wounded and missing. But regardless of the exact figure and despite the slow release of official casualty lists, it was clear early on that the "gallant stand" made by the Canadian units had exacted a heavy toll.[10] As Cody had told his Toronto congregation that

anxious 25 April: "The terrible experience that has come to us in Canada, bringing with it sorrow and anguish to many, has made us realize the grim fact that we are at war."[11]

Public memorials and parish services acknowledging the sacrifices that had been made by the Canadian troops were swiftly organized. In Calgary, the services held throughout the day on 2 May at the pro-Cathedral of the Redeemer were "of a Memorial character for those who fell."[12] Bishop James Fielding Sweeny of Toronto requested that churches throughout his diocese hold memorials.[13] In Montreal's St. John the Evangelist, Monday, 3 May marked the beginning of a series of requiem celebrations for the war dead to be held on the first Monday of every month.[14] Among the large public memorials organized were one on Parliament Hill on 29 April[15] and another in Halifax on 9 May. Speaking at the Halifax memorial, addressing an estimated ten thousand people, Archbishop of Nova Scotia, Clarence Lamb Worrell, said, "We have come together as Canadians, and therefore as citizens of the greatest empire the world has ever known, and we are proud to declare ourselves citizens of that empire, not only in times of prosperity, but of adversity as well. We have the privileges . . . We are ready to bear the responsibilities . . ."[16] Through their service and self-sacrifice, Canadians soldiers would become something more than mere individuals – John McCrae would famously give them voice in his poem "In Flanders Fields" as *the Dead*. In a similar fashion, the tens of thousands who gathered across Canada to commemorate the achievements and losses of the Canadian troops would be united as Canadians, as citizens of the British Empire, and as mourners. This applied to equally those in deep mourning with loved ones who had been killed, to those with no immediate connection to those serving overseas, and to those who would themselves sail as later troop contingents. As Cody said, ". . . this sorrow has made the Empire more closely akin. The private sorrows of individuals become the common sorrow of the people."[17]

Stepping back from the series of events of late April and early May of 1915, it is clear that looking at sermons in this way is always looking at reactions to an event. I have tried to present not only the words of clergymen, but something of the information world they inhabited. In preparing their sermons, Canadian clergymen were faced with an ongoing situation, about which they had received little notice, only incomplete information, and little opportunity to consult with one another.[18] Individual differences in wording and emphasis are apparent between the different

clergymen, something which is only to be expected, but more important are the thematic commonalities. The three that I have tried to point out – the idea that the war would deepen national life, the righteousness of Britain's cause, and the communal aspects of both the war effort and commemoration – are the dominant themes in the early war period and come out particularly clearly during the period of crisis following the Second Battle of Ypres.

Sermons themselves are an interesting type of text, bridging the divide between document and oration. They are intended to be heard, usually within the context of a religious service. This fact, which may seem obvious, impacts both their subject matter and the type of language used. The "high diction" that Paul Fussell draws attention to in *The Great War and Modern Memory* is the expected tone, and is combined with a particular conservatism and formality of language and form. Words like righteousness and duty are therefore extremely important and are used without any sense of irony.[19] The series of sermons presented here, drawn from a two week period in the spring of 1915 further fit into a broader genre of sermons preached on what are called "national events." Analysis of these national sermons has been used to provide insight into religious attitudes toward the state and culture during times of national upheaval, including the War of American Independence,[20] the Napoleonic Wars,[21] and the Boer War,[22] when such attitudes are more likely to be in a state of flux. During the Great War, as during these previous conflicts, days of public humiliation, prayer, and fasting were held and provided occasions for clerics to preach on national or political events. Sermons of this type were not invariably associated with wars as the opening of Parliamentary sessions and the dedications of public buildings also served as occasions for national sermons, nor were they necessarily preached on organized days or at special services.[23] Clergymen could, and did, decide to address events of national and political importance on their own, whether from a sense of national duty or recognition of the pastoral opportunities created by events in the wider world.[24] Aside from a Day of Prayer organized on 3 January, Canadian war sermons preached during the first year of the war were of the "unorganized" type, with clerics making their own decisions about which events to address and when. While the voluntary character of the sermons regarding the Second Battle of Ypres and other war-related events makes it difficult to assess how widespread this type of preaching really was, it is nonetheless impossible to make local evaluations regarding the importance attached to these national events within Anglican

populations. The widespread acknowledgement of the Second Battle of Ypres in Anglican churches across Canada speaks to the perceived importance of the battle at the time that it was fought.

While it was not uncommon for national sermons preached during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to be published in pamphlet form, both in Britain and in Canada, comparatively few Anglican sermons from the First World War period in Canada have been preserved in this way. The survival of sermon texts, in whole or in part, outside personal papers residing in archival collections, is largely dependent on reporting in secular and religious newspapers. Of course, this does introduce the problem of editorial selection bias, but in the multiple instances of duplicate publication – where a text appears in two or more places, usually one religious and one secular – the fidelity of transmission is extremely good for the sermon texts themselves. Leaving aside the potential problems involved with relying on newspapers, there are several advantages to this approach. As Gordon Heath points out in the introduction to his study of Canadian Protestant churches during the Boer War, the importance and value of newspapers as sources of information, both to the historian and the contemporary reader, makes them impossible to ignore, despite their pitfalls.[25] Not only were they essential sources of information in a world before radio and reliable long distance telephone lines, but the ephemeral nature of newspapers also means that the sermons chosen for publication were considered topical to either events or to the liturgical season. While these contemporary accounts may rely heavily on well-known or particularly well-spoken preachers, the surrounding commentary can help indicate the reception the statements received. In addition, S.F. Wise suggested in a 1968 article that unpublished sermons may, in fact, be better gauges of public opinion than those preached on organized events and later published in pamphlet form, which are more inclined to be carefully edited and adhere to semi-official sentiments.[26]

So what do *these* sermons say about Canadian identity and society at the beginning of the Great War? First, it is clear that Canadian Anglicans thought positively of themselves as citizens of the British Empire. Given the institutionalized imperialism of even the name of the Church of England in Canada, this is perhaps unsurprising, but it is nonetheless worth mentioning as Canadian nationalism is often said to have been born during the war. With this in mind, it is also clear that, even at this early point in the war, there is a clear pride in the actions and place of Canada as a distinct part of the Empire. To quote one of Farthing's

statements briefly, "The achievements of our men have brought Canada into a new and more honourable place in the Empire."[27] Second, it is clear that Anglican clerics were active and important interpreters of national and political events during this period. The lack of comment and the amount of press regarding their activities indicates that this involvement was neither surprising nor unwelcome to the population. How influential these clerical statements actually were is still a question of speculation, but the historical importance of clergymen as local figures during this period is clear despite broader questions of secularization and religious attendance.[28] Finally, and particularly telling, is an observation about what is absent from sermons of this first period of the war; although they unfailingly offer support for the war effort and belief in the righteousness of Britain's cause, the clergymen are not at this point unthinkingly jingoistic. To give a clear example from the short period presented earlier, during the uncertain waiting period before the first casualty lists from the Second battle of Ypres were published, Farthing contrasted the encouragement that could be drawn from the self-sacrifice of the soldiers with the problems of graft that seemed to be rampant in Ottawa. There is clearly a strong trend of patriotism, but it is tempered by reflection and a tendency to critique the faults apparent in Canadian national life.

The lack of systematic attention paid to clerical rhetoric during this period has led to several serious misrepresentations in the historical record. As is hopefully clear from even this brief survey, the conflict was not one between "good" and "evil" nor was it portrayed as a "just war," both of which are common assumptions regarding the views of the churches. The Great War was, however, a righteous war that could be justified, not only on the basis of international law, but because it was seen as a fight to preserve all that was good about British civilization. The themes apparent in this small group of sermons are in many ways characteristic of the earliest period of war preaching. The level of thematic agreement amongst the various clergymen speaking about the battle is high. Perhaps more important to note, however, is that an even higher degree of thematic agreement is present if the sermons from the first year of the war, rather than from a period lasting little less than a month, are taken as a whole. For a church with an established prayer book, whose words were repeated throughout Anglican Canada, this strong agreement demonstrates an appeal to a shared linguistic heritage. But it also speaks to a shared mindset about Canada, its relation to the Empire, and the duty of Canadians with regard to the struggle overseas. The language, although formal,

is rarely formulaic at this early stage, suggesting that, at least for the first year of the war, the calls to prayer and service – calls which were not always separable – were not merely pro forma, but something felt more deeply by the clergymen. The responses of the congregations, both in terms of enlistment figures and patriotic efforts, further suggests that the sentiments voiced by the clergymen were not falling on hostile or unreceptive ears. For a large number of Canadians it was clear that they, who enjoyed the privileges of belonging to the Empire, were not only duty-bound but also proud to do their part in defending the Empire and its values – democracy, liberty, fair play, justice, etc.

In conclusion, I would like to circle back to where I started, the aftermath of the Second Battle of Ypres. From this point in the spring of 1915, the war changed for Canadians both at home and abroad. The use of gas at Ypres and the civilian casualties caused by the sinking of the Lusitania on 7 May 1915, changed people's conception of the enemy they were facing and how the war would proceed; this is reflected back in Anglican sermons. Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia, announced that a further two troop contingents would be raised for overseas service – Canada's third and fourth divisions – in answer to news of the fighting and losses at Ypres. In response to this further need, clergymen would become recruiting agents. Their support for the cause of the Empire would not waver, but the coming hardships – fuel and food shortages, influenza, division over conscription and continued casualties, among others – would increase the Church's concern for social problems, encourage a new ecumenism, and begin to forge a new conception of the Canadian nation and the Church's place in it. As the war lengthened without an Allied breakthrough and victory began to seem elusive, the nature of their appeals would change, but not their faith that the cause would triumph or that the sacrifices were worthwhile. The Second Battle of Ypres had but the cup of anguish and sorrow to the lips of the Canadian people for the first time, but not for the last time, and it would require calmness, self-control, prayer, courage, and, perhaps most of all, endurance to see them through the trials that were still to come. By the end private sorrow would indeed have become public property.

Endnotes

1. H.J. Cody quoted in *The Globe* (Toronto), "Ministers Eulogize Canada's Dead Heroes," 3 May 1915, 5.

2. J.M. Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I," *Canadian Historical Review* 49, no. 3 (1968): 213-233.

3. For accounts of the battle itself, see N.M. Greenfield, *Baptism of Fire: The Second Battle of Ypres and the Forging of Canada, April 1915* (Toronto: Harper Collins Canada, 2008); and Tim Cook, *At the Sharp End: Canadians Fighting the Great War 6* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007).

4. *The Globe* (Toronto), 22 April 1915, 1.

5. *The Globe* (Toronto), 24 April 1915, 1.

6. J. Cragg Farthing quoted in *Canadian Churchman*, 6 May 1915, 296.

7. *Montreal Churchman,* "Prayers Authorized to be Said During the War," Sept. 1914, 10.

8. *The Globe* (Toronto), 26 April 1915, 1.

9. *The Gazette* (Montreal), 28 April 1915, 1.

10. Ian Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 39-40.

11. H.J. Cody quoted in *Canadian Churchman*, 6 May 1915, 286.

12. *The Calgary Herald*. 1 May 1915, 6.

13. *Canadian Churchman,* 6 May 1915, 286.

14. *The Gazette* (Montreal), "Echoes of Battle in Many Churches," 3 May 1915, 11.

15. *The Globe* (Toronto), "Impressive Service on Parliament Hill," 30 April 1915, 5.

16. *The Herald* (Halifax), "Ten Thousand Halifax People Joined in Notable Memorial Service," 10 May 1915, 2.

17. C.L. Worrell quoted in "Ten Thousand Halifax People Joined in Notable Memorial Service," 10 May 1915.

18. J. Wolffe, "British Sermons on National Events," in *A New History of the Sermon: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. R.H. Ellision (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 184.

19. See P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

20. Among others, see H.P. Ippel, "British Sermons and the American Revolution," *Journal of Religious History* 12 (1982): 191-205.

21. Among others, see "British Sermons on National Events."

22. Among others, see M.D. Chapman, "Theological Responses in England to the South African War, 1899-1902," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 16, no. 2 (2009): 181-196.

23. S.F. Wise, "Sermon Literature and Canadian Intellectual History," in *God's Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth Century Canada*, eds. A.B. McKillop and P. Romney (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 13-18.

24. See "British Sermons on National Events."

25. Gordon Heath, *The War With a Silver Lining: Canadian Protestant Churches and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), xv-xxvii.

26. See "Sermon Literature and Canadian Intellectual History."

27. Farthing quoted in *The Gazette* (Montreal), "Montreal Mourned Her Heroic Dead," 1 May 1915, 5.

28. See D.B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1992) for a discussion of these matters.