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Rev. Dr. Morar Murray-Hayes

The Message: The 'Art' of War

Slide 38. The Message: "The Art of War"

The second world war has always loomed largest in my personal history of war. It was the war that defined my parents in every possible way. Their identities, their relationship, their parenting style, their work ethic, their memories, their hopes, their dreams, their fears.

But thanks to a Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit, "World War I and the Visual Arts" and a couple of paintings from the Canadian War Museum by Fred Varley and A.Y. Jackson, we have an opportunity to view the first world war through the eyes of those who portrayed it.

The first World War had its origins in a time of great optimism that hailed the new century. Early on, patriotism and nationalism were coupled with the desire for adventure: a brief adventure.

One can see through pictures from early in the war, the belief that the conflict would lead to a more peaceful, spiritual, anti-materialist era:

We saw protective angels guiding soldiers into battle
war was seen as a spiritual mission,
a fight between good and evil.
An act of faith.

Come with me back to how the war was experienced; there are lessons for us to learn from this powerful and awful experience of a world turned upside down.

Slide 39. The picture of avenging angels hurling boulders at a town below recalls the destruction of the city of Babylon.

[Natalia Goncharova, Doomed City, Mystical Images of War, lithograph, 1914, one of the earliest representations of the war]

War is seen by Goncharova as a vehicle of God's judgment on a civilization that had lost its sense of God. It was exposing the vulnerability of human life and the vanity of so many human aspirations.

Few wars have been as pointless as World War I, or more costly, and yet a sense of mission pulls out of people a sense of higher purpose beyond self, a willingness to sacrifice self. If only that sense of self-offering, of which God has made us capable, could be turned to God's mission in the world for justice and peace!

Here is a first lesson for us: as the prophet said, 'all flesh is grass,' and war dramatically exposes for us the truth that life is fragile, and the familiar world that can seem so enduring and permanent is actually in God's hands

What happened to destroy that faith?

When World War I began in the summer of 1914, few could envision the extent of the devastation that would result.

As the reality of this brutal war became apparent, artists who were at the front changed their positions to express anguished regret.

Slide 40. Pictures of great ships and

Slide 41. limitless lines of infantrymen stretching as long as 20 miles gave way to

Slide 42. images of women, the elderly, and children taken hostage, used as human shields, treated brutally and executed without pity.

[Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, French (born Switzerland), lithograph, 1915.] An overriding theme of his art was marginalized populations, and he immediately recognized the plight of displaced persons.

Between 1914 and 1915 200,000 refugees fled Belgium, and this picture shows a mother and infant leading a human sea of orphans fleeing Belgium after a German attack.

Steinlen focussed his art on displaced persons. In “Exodus,” he uses the Bible to make sense of human suffering. The idea of exodus calls forth a sense both the pain and the freedom of leaving a world of suffering behind us, and it suggests a hope that God may yet show us a new land of promise. In the picture, the mother’s eyes fixate on a distant unknown, and the children look unsure. The intensity of suffering in wartime is so huge, still God calls us forth on pilgrimage into unknown futures, and we pray that God will be with us.

Artists portray:

A dawning sense of foreboding
an apocalyptic nightmare made visible

- Slide 43. Battle scarred terrain,
- Slide 44. A bird’s eye view of a French village destroyed
- [André Devambez, French, etching with aquatint, 1915, “Le Fou” — the crazy guy.] In Devambez’ Le Fou, a man gone mad runs through a bombed-out town. Perhaps the greatest horror of war, that all our pain and sacrifices are meaningless, and will leave us alone and unhealed. Artists, psalmists, holocaust survivors and others try to process for us where redemption can be found. Church exists for this: God brings us out of our aloneness, and tries to remind us of God’s love for us.

- Slide 45. The bombing of Notre Dame Cathedral at Rheims through propellor blades. The rose window somehow still intact.

Slide 46. Over a million miles of barbed wire, machine guns and gas, concrete and steel
9 million died in combat

Five million died of starvation, illness and war related complications

Twenty million injured

Millions of civilians suffered and died.

Even in the midst of devastation, artists recorded tiny moments of humanity:

- Slide 47. A prisoner of war, but still playing his cello,
- [Maurice Langaskens, Belgian, “The Cellist,” 1917, watercolour coloured pencil and graphite.]
 - Langaskens was confined in a prisoner of war camp in 1918, and drew pictures of the isolation and melancholy. Here a fellow prisoner, who even in this heart of darkness finds a moment of civilized humanity, symbolized by a cello and music score, where God has made available a connection with beauty, creativity, and truth in one of the most desperate contexts imaginable
- Slide 48. Soldiers in a trench gathered around a fallen comrade
- Slide 49. A Red Cross volunteer remembering the Allied troops she nursed.

These portrayals of tiny moments of humanity seemed to be calling to a righteous God

- to record a mournful call for justice;
- to avenge their suffering.

The dream of war as a spiritual mission bringing in a new era of peace was crushed by the inhumanity of modern warfare and primitive brutality. Faith was profoundly tested.

Slide 50. The German artist Kathe Kollwitz helped her under age son Peter to join up at the beginning of the war. But then he was killed. 'Killed in action'

Slide 51. On the bottom of this drawing called, "Lament," Otto Dix records the first two lines from Psalm 137, the lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem:

By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
 On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.
 Yearning for the city from which we had been exiled.

Slide 52. Ernst Barlach pleads for peace in his drawing of a mournful Madonna with hands clutched in a prayer for peace, entitled, "Dona Nobis Pacem!": "Give us Peace!"

Our reverent silence on this day reminds us of millions who died, for the missing, the wounded, veterans, the refugees and those who lost loved ones in this war and all wars since..

How do we hear God speaking to us now, in a world that has found even more dastardly ways of killing since?

Jesus walked in a violent world, showing us a different way to live. And as we walk in his footsteps, we show the world a different way to live. The scriptures we have seen today stand in stark contrast to the images of violence.

Jesus speaks of peace even as he becomes a victim of violence. Even more, Jesus IS a person of peace. God gives us this man of peace so that we can believe in the God of peace. And the faith in a peace-loving God that we receive as a gift from God in Jesus makes a difference in how we live our lives.

And so we hold on to stories like the story of the Christmas Eve peace, when Stille Nacht/Silent Night rang out in the night from trench to trench and enemies became brothers for a few short hours.

St. Paul was one of the first to be transformed from the violence of his world through an experience of the presence of Christ. His conversion involved a temporary loss of sight -- the evil acts of a zealot were erased from his eyes and Christ's presence gave him 'eyes of peace.'

War dramatically exposes the fragility of life, and our dependence on God.

Human sacrifice is possible -- but to what end? Sacrifice for justice and peace would be so much more pleasing to God.

Even in the midst of suffering, God calls us into an unknown future.

As our fear that our sacrifice has no meaning, we turn to God and God's community to find purpose and redemption. We see that in moments of beauty even in the midst of despair, and in shared community where we discover that we are not alone.

God's gift to us in Christ, Man of Peace, opens us to the life of peace.

War destroys so much of what is good, and creates so much horror, pain, and loneliness; and there is no human will that can overcome it. But there is God's grace, if it finds us, and a final proclamation of hope is that if we can bring ourselves to think on God's truth, then the God of peace will be with us.

Let's hear how Paul sought to pass on the pattern of following Christ to peace: