

The Wisdom of Remembering

J.R.R. Tolkien was born in 1892 and died in 1973. At the start of WWI he would have been 22. When war was declared on Germany in September, 1939 he was 47 years old. He was a man who witnessed first-hand the battle field and trenches of 1914 to 18. He was an Oxford Scholar who would have seen many young men go to war, and not return – who had been Oxford Students in the late 30s and 40s.

In January 1997, Tolkien's epic fantasy "The Lord of the Rings" was voted the greatest book of the 20th century in a readers' poll conducted by Britain's Channel 4 and the Waterstone's bookstore chain. A book that created an imaginative world that so vividly captured the epic struggle between good and evil. A book centering on two unassuming hobbits, Frodo and Sam Wise Gamgee, who in order to stop the advance of Mordor and the machinations of Sauron to control and dominate Middle Earth, have to take that one ring and destroy it in the fires of Mount Doom.

The inscription on the ring read:

***One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them***

Although this book was not an allegory, we are drawn to think of the parallels between the Ring and Hitler's Third Reich. A Reich that envisioned a 1000 year reign of an evil ideology, that like Sauron's intention for Middle Earth, would have bound the world in an evil dragnet. Imagine if Hitler had been victorious. What would the world be like for us today? Indeed may I suggest many of us would not be here if the D Day landings of June 6th 1944 had not ultimately led to Victory in Europe.

And to think that Canada, a country with a population of less than 12 Million in 1944 played a decisive role. On D-Day, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division landed on Juno Beach. The Canadian assault troops stormed ashore in the face of fierce opposition from German strongholds and mined beach obstacles. The soldiers raced across the wide-open beaches swept with machine gun fire, and stormed the gun positions. In fierce hand-to-hand fighting, they fought their way into the towns of Bernières, Courseulles and St. Aubin and then advanced inland, securing a critical bridgehead for the allied invasion. D Day was a turning point in World War II and led to the liberation of Europe and the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Fourteen thousand young Canadians stormed Juno Beach on D-Day. Their courage, determination and self-sacrifice were the immediate reasons for the success in those critical hours. The fighting they endured was fierce and frightening. The price they paid was high - the battles for the beachhead cost 340 Canadian lives and another 574 wounded. Sir John Keegan died in 2012. He was awarded the Order of the British Empire, was a Fellow of the Royal

Society of Literature and an eminent British historian. He wrote a book entitled: *The Six Armies in Normandy*. In it he stated the following concerning the Canadian 3rd Division on D-Day:

“At the end of the day, its forward elements stood deeper into France than those of any other division. The opposition the Canadians faced was stronger than that of any other beach save Omaha. That was an accomplishment in which the whole nation could take considerable pride.”¹

Tolkien’s concentration on unassuming Hobbits, whose courage and will to accomplish their task, against seemingly insurmountable odds, is I think, a tribute and testimony to the anonymous soldiers who took Juno Beach on June 6th 1944. It is also a tribute to all of the soldiers and civilians who, not only on Juno Beach, but in countless other battles and entrenched in evil regimes – like Soviet and Chinese Communism – resisted the forces of evil, to the point of their own deaths. A number surpassing 123 million in the 20th century died as a consequence of war, genocide and megalomaniac leaders.

It is important therefore that we always remember on a day like this those who were subjected to such horrific violence as we praise, pray for and give thanks to God for their valour and premature deaths as a result of such evil.

I think it is also important for us to realize that if 123 million people perished from enemy regimes or from their own governments, as happened in Mao’s China and Stalin’s Soviet Union, we need to have the wisdom to remember that we still live in a world that is engaged in this epic battle between good and evil depicted in the Lord of the Rings.

Consider these numbers. There is another kind of death that has occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century and into the first twenty years of the 21st. Since 1973 there have been 54 million abortions in the United States and 3.2 million babies in Canada have been aborted since 1970. Parents killing their own unborn children. And often being told by doctors it is a simple procedure to remove tissue. But not being told anything about the aftermath of how they may experience the sorrow, remorse and regret for what they have done.

Then consider the horror that is regularly presented to us of mass murders in places like Las Vegas, a gunman killing 26 people at a Baptist Church outside of San Antonio. Citizens killing other citizens with gun manufactures making huge profits from the sale of munitions.

On this Remembrance Day weekend it is not only wise to remember the valour of those who took beaches like Juno.

¹ <http://www.junobeach.info/>

We are to take to heart Jesus' parable of the Wise and Unwise virgins by prudently discerning how to live each day of our lives as people who uphold the intrinsic dignity and value of every human being.

This is a value that can be lost on us when we consider how many human lives have been expendable since 1914 and how we can all too easily be lulled into a kind of complacency whereby we depersonalize death.

To have wisdom in remembering is to hear the sage words expressed in our Old Testament Reading as applying to us.

***Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
and is found by those who seek her.***

Such wisdom was displayed in the courageous loyalty shown by those who gave themselves to defeat evil, be they hobbits from the Shire, or the 3rd Battalion Soldiers from Calgary. For us the battle is not as obvious or immediate as the one faced by those who landed on Normandy's shores. But it is very real and requires us to live purposefully.

As Roman Catholics we see a continuity between the defense of human liberty that witnessed Canadians participate in the epic battles of the Last Century to our commitment to the defense of human liberty in our own century in the moral issues like abortion.

It is because we understand that wisdom "hastens to make herself known to those who desire her", that we take so seriously the fundamental value and dignity of every human being. The Scriptural witness speaks to us of this fundamental value.

But to take seriously this application of wisdom requires we be people of memory. People who remember there were those like the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division who landed on Juno Beach because they knew the diabolical ideology of Nazism had to be arrested. Creatures like the Hobbits of Middle Earth who understood their part in securing the well-being of the Shire and all the peoples; of Tolkien's imaginary world. And people like us who will give voice and witness to a dimension of value that is being forgotten in the 21st century. The inherent dignity of every human life from conception through to natural death.

May we have the wisdom to remember on this Remembrance Day.