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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Y43, O6
All Souls 11 a.m. Fauré Requiem Eucharist
Sunday 11 November 2018 Armistice Centenary

Wisdom 3:1-9
Psalm 130
1 Thess. 4:13-18
John 5:24-27

Becoming Visible

"But the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, and no torment will ever touch them" (Wisdom 3:1).

Being human involves constantly passing in and out of visibility. Most of us, most of the time, are invisible – simply a means to someone else's end. We're the car that stands between the person behind us and catching the next green light. People regard us as the way some kind of work gets done or even as an inconvenience to be overcome.¹

Children can become invisible to their parents. They can be merely a source of pride or embarrassment. Parents can treat their child as a task, as something to be perfected rather than a person to be loved. Even our friends can treat us primarily as a way of fulfilling some purpose in their life that has little to do with who we really are.

We experience this invisibility from strangers and even people who are supposed to love us. But at the same time we long to be noticed, to be seen as we really are. One of the greatest joys in life happens when someone really recognizes us or when we experience the humanity of another person.

On a hot midsummer day I experienced this in a very strange way. I did the early stages of my dissertation research in the Harvard Law School Library. I remember taking a quick break from my work and discovering a special archive exhibit on *Ruhleben*.

Walking around the room I gradually learned more about this German concentration camp. The inmates were British men unlucky enough to find themselves in the German Empire at the outset of World War One. I saw the map of this former horse racing track in the Berlin suburb of Spandau and read how prisoners slept on the hard floors of un-insulated horse stalls during the freezing winter.

Two layers of security kept the prisoners behind wooden and wire fences. The rules printed in German and English effectively showed that every aspect of life was absolutely regulated by the clock. Prisoners only received one meal of vegetable soup and bread each day with an ounce of meat on Sundays.²

The exhibit had photos of black sailors who had been working on British merchant ships when they were captured, and of other prisoners standing in endless lines out in the snow. I saw chits from the laundry service and the barber. There was a model of the living quarters, playbills from prisoner theater performances, pictures of incarcerated musicians, examples from art exhibits and everyday objects like cups and uniforms.

Other than their identity as Englishmen, these prisoners had become invisible to the Germans. But through the objects in the glass display cases they were becoming more real to me. I wondered what visits were like with their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. What did it feel like to be caught in a struggle between empires and confined in this cold place.

It was a remarkable coincidence really. It even took me a while to understand. My great-grandfather was one of those prisoners. I looked for his name in the registers. I tried to spot his face in the crowd photos, but there is no one alive to tell me what happened. Looking back at my family's history, I know that he bore the marks of that invisibility for the rest of his life. The inherited trauma still affects my family.

Today we remember, we strain to see again in our imagination, all the ones whom we have lost. We also recall that on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918 an Armistice was signed ending World War I. The word Armistice comes from the Latin words *arma* (or "arms") and *sistere* ("to stand still"). You can imagine the stillness and quiet when both sides in that conflict laid down their arms, emerged from the trenches and began to really see each other for the first time and when the gates of *Ruheleben* were opened.

The historian Barbara Tuchman opens her book *The Guns of August* with nine kings riding in the funeral procession for King Edward the VII of England in 1910. They are followed by a list of the princes and emperors who were present. These included, "five heirs apparent, forty imperial or royal highnesses, seven queens" and more. "Together they represented seventy nations in the greatest assemblage of royalty and rank ever gathered in one place." ³

Despite the fact that the sovereigns of Europe were siblings and cousins they still managed to plunge the entire world into a war of poison gas, aerial bombing and trench warfare that killed nine million combatants and seven million civilians.⁴ It is important to remember that the war arose out of a complex system of alliances and a kind of paranoia about being invaded.

It was also the culmination of an arm's race, that with the new pervasiveness of mass shootings, should remind us that having weapons makes us more likely to use them.⁵

The Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires were swept away. The punishing terms of the Treaty of Versailles led directly into the fascism that only twenty years later resulted in World War II. While the "war to end all wars" erased the lives of millions it also led us to new ways of seeing each other.

At the end of hostilities the scholar W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963) pointed out the sacrifices made by African American soldiers who still were not free in their own land. He writes, "This country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land. It lynches."⁶

In the United Kingdom "the slaughter-bench that birthed the 20th century," also led to the legalization of voting for women who were over thirty and qualified as householders (or were married to a householder).⁷ Accompanying the horrors of this last century were global movements toward liberation and the recognition of every person's dignity. In our own day we continue this work.

At school chapel on Friday Kevin Fox spoke about the Fauré Requiem that we are hearing today. He said that in contrast to the drama of other requiems Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) hoped to compose something peaceful, consoling and quiet. He wanted to evoke the comfort of resting fully in God.

I believe we need this kind of peace and sanctuaries like this cathedral to experience others and ourselves as we really are. For me Jesus is the ultimate example of someone who really sees every person he encounters. He constantly reminds us that no one is ever invisible to God and that, "there is no situation in which God's presence doesn't make a difference."⁸

Being human involves constantly passing in and out of visibility. Today in this place of stillness and quiet let us remember the joy of laying down our arms. Let us accept the challenge of seeing the people who are invisible to the world. May those who sacrificed and our beloved dead be seen again as we become visible to each other through God's grace.

¹ For other people we are the subject of entertaining gossip. At some point we also have been used to make someone else feel superior.

² "Tells of Suffering as German Prisoner: No Medical Attention for the Sick and Impossible Food – An Ounce of Meat a Week" *New York Times*, 28 June 1918.

³ Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (NY: Random House, 1962) 1.

⁴ The "World War I" Wikipedia article notes that between 50-100 million lives were lost as a result of the war if you include genocides and the Spanish Influenza epidemic.

⁵ Between 1870 and 1914 military spending in Germany increased by 73% and in Russia by 39%.

Wikipedia article "World War I" accessed 10 November 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I

⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, "Returning Soldiers," *The Crisis*, XVIII (May, 1919), p. 13.

⁷ Susan Pedersen, "A Knife to the Heart," *London Review of Books* 30 August 2018.

⁸ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) 156.