

ST MARK'S FOUNDERS' DAY SERMON 2017

The Rev'd Grant Moore

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever sat at High Table and felt the steely gaze of Sir Archibald Grenfell Price? I was fooled by the oblique pose at first, until I looked closely and discovered our foundational Master staring straight at me. Now that I'm used to it, I try to fathom what he's thinking. What's behind that faintly sardonic, school-teacherly grimace?

A mildly scolding: "Now you lot! No getting up to any nonsense!" Or an astonished: "What on earth are you girls doing in here?" Or could it be something else? Something Archie's too self-effacing to say? "Do you realise what sacrifices I made so you can sit here and wine and dine in this hallowed hall?" And I have to confess almost certainly, I don't!

Nevertheless, I must admit, since Ellie and I have lived on site, sacrifice is never far from my mind. Nothing to do with selling up and moving here. More to do with my morning ritual. The arresting view I get when I fling open the dining room curtains. For there, etched against the morning sky, are the soaring spires of St Peter's Cathedral, and atop each one, a cross – three high crosses. And there's something quite uncanny about their arrangement. From my perspective, the northern, more imposing cross, appears in the centre, flanked by the two identical southern ones.

What a day-primer for a priest! That symbolic silhouette, so Golgotha-like! A riveting diorama of Christ's great sacrifice. And a potent reminder of those compelling words which I read earlier: **"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."**

It's actually been quite a fortnight for sacrifice. Easter, two weekends ago Anzac Day on Tuesday last and just this week, as an ardent student of military history, I read the poignant story of Willy Lear.

Willy Lear [*or Francis M. Lear, as he appears in the official records*], was an 18-year-old Confederate sympathizer living in Palmyra, Missouri, during the American Civil War. When a local Unionist disappeared, presumed murdered, the area commander of Union troops, Colonel McNeil, ordered that ten Confederate prisoners be executed in retaliation.¹

Willy Lear was deeply moved by the impending fate of one of the men, a neighbour and acquaintance. He petitioned the Union officer: "Sir! That man has a wife and family. If you execute him, you'll be making orphans of ten little boys and girls. Please let me take his place." There was no objection. In due course, on October 18th, 1862, along with nine others, Willy Lear was shot by firing squad in the local fairground.² Even allowing for the

¹ Major D. W. Whittle, "Willie Lear the Substitute," <https://mountainmanna.com/2009/04/07willie-lear-the-substitute/> Accessed 27.4.2017.

² "Return to Civil War St Louis: The Palmyra Massacre," www.civilwarstlouis.com/History/Palmyra.htm Accessed 27.4.2017.

rough justice of wartime, the whole affair provoked outrage on both sides in the US, to the extent that Willy Lear's sacrifice went little-noticed. Apparently though, there is a gravestone in Palmyra cemetery which reads: *Sacred to the memory of Willy Lear. He took my place.*³

How Christ-like! a courageous act, emblematic of the smaller-scale yet crucially important sacrifices of community-minded individuals in every generation. And we are their beneficiaries. Especially here at St Mark's. Beneficiaries of time, largesse, and sheer dogged effort! Which, of course, is why we're here this morning – to commemorate all those, without whose sacrifice, there'd be no St Mark's College as we know it, no Marksmen and Markswomen with their unique lifestyle and privileges.

And so we honour, first, the founders [*and although there were others, I'll name just four*]; Sir Archibald Grenfell Price, the Reverend Julian Bickersteth, Sir Henry Simpson Newland, and the Right Reverend Arthur Nutter Thomas. Their visionary sacrifice has been the indispensable foundation upon which all who followed have built.

Second, the benefactors, from Lady Price all the way down to some of you sitting here amongst us this morning. It is by their, your sacrificial generosity, your time, talents and money, that the founders' visionary goals were brought to fruition.

Third, our patron saint, St Mark, reputedly the young man who ran away naked when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁴ [*One can only imagine what escapades he might have got up to as a Marksman.*] Ultimately, Mark became an exemplary defender of the faith, an evangelist who sacrificed himself that others might know the liberating truth of the gospel.

And fourth, the twenty young men, whose names Mary will read out shortly. When fascist dictatorships threatened to squeeze the life out of the world's democracies, when only rivers of sacrificial blood could stave off disaster, they resolutely helped turn the tide, with their *own* blood. We are deeply indebted to them for their part in guaranteeing the freedoms we enjoy today.

It's hard to do justice to all those who deserve to be remembered. Because only God knows all their names. Every contribution. Only God knows exactly what is due to whom. And it's God who will ultimately reward more grandly and justly than any fragile remembrance of ours.

So tomorrow evening, at High Table, during a lull in conversation, I'll glance up at Sir Archibald Grenfell Price and think of him as representative of all those who've made sacrifices, big and small, for this College I'll look him straight in the eye and simply whisper for all of us **thank you!**

Amen.

³ "Fallen Heroes Deserve Tribute," articles.sun-sentinel.com/2005-05-27/community/0505240247_1_memorial-day-lear-soldiers Accessed 27.4.2017.

⁴ William Neil, *William Neil's One Volume Bible Commentary* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 382.