

---

# Losing your Life to Gain it

2 Tim 2: 3-13; John 12: 24-6

**A Sermon preached at Pleshey, Essex, on June 22, 2015 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells**

---

The British novelist Melvyn Bragg grew up on the north-west coast of Cumbria. His novel *A Soldier's Return* tells the story of Sam, a lieutenant in the British army in Burma during the Far Eastern campaign of the Second World War. There are two settings for the novel. The first is a Cumbrian market town in the mid-1940s, where Sam tries with great difficulty to settle back into the rhythms of work and family life. The second is Burma two or three years earlier, to which Sam's mind and the narrative of the novel frequently return in flashbacks – flashbacks that explain why settling back into mundane provincial life is such a challenge.

Sam tries to deal with his inner turmoil by writing letters to the families of his soldiers who lost their lives during the fighting in Burma. Because his regiment all came from Cumbria, Sam has the opportunity to go and visit some of the families. On one occasion Sam visits Mr and Mrs Bell, whose son Ian had been a member of Sam's company. Sam sits down at their house to an inevitably awkward tea, and begins to explain to Mr and Mrs Bell how Ian had been a terrific soldier. Sam goes on to say that Ian talked a great deal about his family, that he'd deeply cared about them and had missed them terribly. Sam said a lot of kind things about Ian – that he was courageous, that everyone liked him, that he was always eager to give others a helping hand. Then the time came for Sam to talk about the way Ian died. Sam went over again the things he'd expressed when he first wrote to Mr and Mrs Bell. A sniper had taken Ian out: his death was sudden and instantaneous, in the midst of combat. Ian hadn't felt anything – he'd been killed in a flash. Silence hung in the room until Mrs Bell took herself back to the kitchen. The two men stayed in silence as they finished their tea. There wasn't anything to say.

Finally Mr Bell took the initiative, and, putting on a hat and a jacket, gestured to Sam it was time to get some fresh air. Sam wheeled his bike beside Mr Bell as they made their way through the village. Then Mr Bell started to make a path toward the sea across the sand dunes, and Sam pushed his bike with more difficulty up a hill. Once they reached the top of the hill Mr Bell set his face toward Scotland, and Sam stood beside him, the bike in between them. They shared a moment to light a cigarette. Mr Bell talked about his time in the First World War, in the medical corps. He'd made it clear he didn't believe in killing; but he wasn't scared. His role was to bring back from no-man's land the charred remains of the bodies the battle left behind. Time and again he'd witnessed a horrifying sight: looking over and again into what was left of a face, he'd become accustomed to throwing up.

All of which was a preliminary to what Mr Bell said next. It was clear he understood that Sam's story was an attempt to be kind. He said straightforwardly to Sam that he wanted to know what really happened to his son Ian. But he didn't turn round to look at Sam as he spoke. Sam wasn't ready for Mr Bell's piercing honesty. Through the swirling wind, and speaking to the back of Mr Bell, Sam began telling a different story. It had been a good day. They'd been in an open patch of land in Burma, in a forest clearing. As he was talking Sam had the image in his mind as vivid as the beach below. There'd been no danger. The Japanese were a long way off. The company was spending the time taking stock and the soldiers were mending their gear. Ian was one of the tidy ones. Sam recalled being a yard away from him. There were plenty of men close by and strewn all over the clearing, tending to their equipment. It was a rare relaxed few days when the enemy wasn't breathing down their throats.

Sam hadn't forgotten a single detail. He saw Ian with a smile and a fag poking out of his mouth, and a dreamy, happy look on his face, completely self-contained – but still sharp enough to realise his lieutenant wanted a cigarette and generous enough to throw him a packet, before resuming his cleaning regime. And then the moment came. Ian was cleaning a grenade. No one would ever understand why. It was hard for Sam to put this into words. All the moisture drained from his mouth as he was speaking. Ian had taken out the pin of the grenade before he'd pulled out the fuse. Why he'd done it, what he imagined he was doing, would forever remain a mystery. There was only one outcome. Five seconds later the grenade would explode.

Just as Mr Bell could never forget the faces of those he'd retrieved from no man's land in the Great War, Sam could never forget the look on Ian's face at that moment. Both men knew straightaway that there was no escape. Surrounded as he was for a hundred yards in each direction by his fellow soldiers, there was nowhere that Ian could throw the grenade without causing carnage. Ian looked open-eyed and open-mouthed, and then, to Sam's astonishment, Ian's face had broken into a gentle, sweet smile. He started to speak; but all of a sudden he doubled over and smothered the grenade with his body, taking into himself the whole force of the explosion. Yet he lived for a further two hours. He didn't scream, but from time to time he simply whimpered, 'Sorry!' How could you step aside from such a sound and such a sight?

With hesitation and careful silences Sam told Mr Bell the whole story. Mr Bell buckled as if he'd been struck, and leant forward in a convulsion as it were to be sick. Then he steadied himself, and announced he wouldn't be telling Ian's mother, since she was only just managing with what she knew. Sam realised the conversation was at an end. He pushed his bike towards the road. When he looked behind him, Mr Bell was stood to attention, ready to face whatever ensued. (Arcade 2003 114-117)

I'd like to focus our attention on the three men in this story. Each of those men knew intimately about sacrifice. The first, Ian, never came back from the war. The second, Sam, did come back but had lost everything. The novel is really about Sam. It's about what happens when you've lost your stomach and your heart but you begin trying to live again. The third character, Mr Bell, stayed in England but his life without his son would never be the same again. So one never came back; one came back but lost everything; one stayed but would never be the same. Each knew all about sacrifice.

I want to suggest to you that the story of Ian, Sam and Mr Bell can be read as a story about God. When Ian looks around the camp and realises that there's nowhere he can throw the grenade, he shows us the face of Christ. Within the ghastly carnage and destruction of war, we catch this glimpse of what and who Jesus is. Jesus is the one who dies so that all may live. Ian experiences in his own body the price of human folly and failure. Why does the pin come out of the grenade? We don't really know. Why does humanity find itself at enmity with itself and at enmity with God? We don't really know. Almost every explanation really comes down to a description of the symptoms. But that the grenade is ticking away, that what we have set loose stands to do untold damage to us and to all creation – that is undeniable: that we know very well. And here is Ian, here is Christ, bent double over the force that threatens to obliterate us, laying down his life that we might be saved.

And in Sam we see God the comforter just as strongly represented. Sam is the one who as the commanding officer represented a kind of parent to Ian. Now, back in Cumbria, he represents Ian to Ian's parents. And uncannily Mr and Mrs Bell see Ian in Sam, and Sam sees Ian in Mr and Mrs Bell. Sam makes his parents present to Ian and makes Ian present to his parents. Sam is the bearer of two stories: the story that Ian died as part of a war that was finally won – the story he tells to Mrs Bell; and the story that Ian died through stupidity and carelessness and folly and in the end through an act of courageous sacrifice that can only evoke awe and astonishment – the story Sam tells to Mr Bell. Sam gives us a picture of the Holy Spirit – the comforter, the one who makes Christ present, the one who offers the face of Christ to the Father and the face of the Father to Christ, the one who breathes into life the story of salvation.

And in Mr Bell we see what it means to lose your only son. In Mr Bell we see what it means to carry in your heart two stories about what your son's death means. The first story is a story of glory, a story in which Ian's death is part of a great achievement, in this case victory in Burma, success in the Far East campaign, peace in our time. The second story is one of folly, no enemy anywhere near, a happy lazy sunny afternoon, a careless lapse in attention, and a breathtaking moment of agonising courage. In Mr Bell we see God the Father, whose only Son dies through a mixture of his indescribable love and our unspeakable folly, and who must live with these two profound truths in his heart for ever.

'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will

keep it for eternal life.’ (John 12.24-5) To lose one’s life is to allow it to be taken into the story of the Trinity, where meanings are bestowed rather than earned, identity is given rather than crafted, eternal life is received rather than achieved. Many of us want to tell an angry story about the world and our lives, rather like the story Mr Bell tells about the First World War – a story of mismanaged resources, of unjust relations where hundreds of poor people die to sustain the lifestyle of their richer compatriots, a story of brutality and cruelty and fear. Others of us want to tell a more idealised story of our lives, rather like the story Sam tells Mrs Bell about Ian, a story of inevitable setbacks on the rolling march to freedom, truth and glory. But the figure we most need to reckon with today is not Mr Bell or Sam. It’s Ian. The pin is out of the grenade. Whether through perversity or ignorance, we are sinners. The pin is out of the grenade, like it or not. We have two options. One is to put as much distance as we can between ourselves and the grenade, whoever else the grenade might damage or destroy. But that wasn’t Ian’s way. Ian’s way was to take the destruction in his own body and in doing so to save the life of others. Ian’s way was to lose his life to gain it, to let his grain of wheat fall so it might bear much fruit.

What might it mean to be like Ian? It simply means to stop making others pay for our sins. It means to take responsibility for our own mistakes, even though that means realising we have damaged things so badly we can never set things right. It means, in Paul’s words, ‘always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies’ (2 Cor 4:10).

To be like Ian means two final things. Ian shows us the only way to redeem the horror of the worst violence the world can generate. Killing is so abhorrent to Ian that he avoids it even at the cost of his own life. He turns his whole body into the shape it needs to be to make his companions’ life possible. He makes the worst horror into something beautiful. This is how he imitates Christ: by shaping his body so as to give us life. This is how he models the life of the Church: a body shaped to bring life to others. This is what the Church asks of us and of our politics: to shape our abundant resources to give life to the world, not to continue to kill others to secure life for ourselves.

And lastly Ian dies saying sorry. He’s made such a sacrifice it seems crazy to be saying sorry. But the truth is, he’s made a mess, and even his noble sacrifice still leaves his fellow soldiers with a disaster. The last thing being like Ian means for us is that once the grenade of our sin has done its worst, however great the sacrifice we’ve made, it will still be important for us to learn how to say sorry.

What does it mean to lose your life in order to gain it? Ministry is a mixture of dealing with Mrs Bell’s fantasy with compassion and patience, recognising Mr Bell’s half-truth with humility and integrity, and aspiring to Sam’s faltering honesty with courage and hope. It’s not always at every moment about the searing honesty of the final conversation between Sam and Mr Bell. But in the arms of the heartbroken Father, in the grace of the sacrificial Son, and in the fellowship of the comforting Spirit, we face the death of such conversations, knowing that true resurrection cannot be found any other way.