



Anzac Thoughts **Rev Richard Bonifant**

Year B, Easter 5
1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8
28 April 2024

In the name of God, Creating, Redeeming, and Giving us Life. Amen.

In the past Anzac Day commemorations played an important part in the life of this community. There was a time when Anzac Day would see parts of the church overflowing with flowers and wreaths as special services were held. Following World War One memorial plaques were placed in this church along with flags and other objects used in military service. This stone pulpit was dedicated to the memory of those who died serving overseas. These choices were incredibly important to this community in that time, because like so much of New Zealand society, young men left this church never to return home.

In that time St Matthew's, like many churches throughout New Zealand, began to struggle with the reality of war. The world had experienced suffering on a scale never before imagined. In the face of World War One humanity was left with the difficult task of trying to make sense of the senseless.

How are we to make sense of war? The search for meaning is one of the origins of religious belief. Religion is in part, an attempt to find meaning in our existence. It is one way we try to understand life and the universe. It is because of this history of wrestling with the big questions that religion has been the place that many people turn to in a time of crisis. One of the biggest mistakes any religion can make, is to respond to a crisis with unwavering certainty. Religion is born of a need to explore difficult questions, but that does not mean it has to find definitive answers to those questions.

Here in this community, both during the war and after it, people began to use bible verses as a way of trying to give meaning to the deaths of so many, the most commonly used being: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends." ¹ That verse taken from the Gospel of John, with the unaltered English of the King James bible, appears on a number of memorials within this building. And we are not alone in using those words this way, they are found on Anzac memorials across the world. And to be honest, I struggle with the use of that particular verse even while I understand the motivation behind its use.

I once heard an excellent interview with church historian Allan Davidson where he addressed the tension many of us feel about using bible verses in this way. As a historian he was able to point out how use of that particular verse was actually debated within the church at the time, with some feeling it was appropriate and others believing that it was not. What he pointed out was that as time went by, the rhetoric of war slowly silenced the dissenting voices that felt that the words were being taken out of context.

Ultimately by aligning itself with the understanding of the war as a just and necessary thing, the church lost its ability to critique or raise questions about what had occurred. As Allan Davidson put it, "New Zealand's national mythology... is embroidered by war rhetoric which mixed duty to God, King and Country with the language of sacrifice, honour, courage, bravery, patriotism and heroism".²

Even today many of us feel reluctant to challenge the language we have inherited to explain these events. That is because no one wants to be perceived as showing disrespect for those who gave so much in time of war. Even I had to think twice about whether I would mention my personal difficulty with the use of those words on memorials here in this church. Like many of you, my family lost loved ones in service to this country. Some of you here today have lived through a world war, or other experiences of extreme violence, and know that pain first hand. I am aware of my privilege, in having lived in a time where my life has not been personally impacted by the reality of war. That said, I want to suggest that how we have talked about the wars of last century is something we should continue to wrestle with, not because the understandings of the past were wrong, but because it is the duty of each generation to remember the past and to make sense of it.

For me the meaning of Anzac Day is not found in the language of sacrifice, but begins with the prayer we have placed at the end of our service book today.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;

Age shall not weary them,

nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning,

we will remember them.

What are we remembering? We are remembering the many young men who travelled over the sea to die in a land that was not their own. We are remembering the many women who also served in different roles, who are often

overlooked in how these stories are told. We are remembering the families who bore the cost of war. We are remembering the failing of governments to seek peaceful resolutions. We are remembering the times when we have been unable to uphold those who hold differing opinions and have labelled them as cowards. We are remembering the men and women who returned from war and the many difficulties they faced returning to normal lives.

Our job is to remember as much of this experience as we can, so that it strengthens our conviction to never let it happen again. Because violence continues to happen. It has continued to happen in the many unnamed and unremembered wars that have happened over the last century. And we should not lose sight of the violence of war in our own time. War is a very present reality for our brothers and sisters in Gaza, the Ukraine, Yemen, Myanmar and more.

There is another passage from scripture that I would like us to reflect on. It is Isaiah's vision of the world as it could be.

“they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.”³

Those aspirational words could be good words for our time. They are words that encourage us to continue to strive for peace. I can think of no greater way to honour those we remember at Anzac Day, than to recommit ourselves to spreading peace to the corners of this earth. Lest we forget.

Amen

1. John 15:13

2. See: <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/spiritualoutlook/audio/20174979/making-sense-of-carnage>

3. Isaiah 2:3