

Anzac Day - 4th Sunday of Easter, 2010

Micah 4: 1-4, Psalm 46, Hebrews 10:32 – 11:1, John 15: 9-17.

The remembering and retelling of personal and community stories can be very powerful. As a child I remember how I loved to hear my mother tell me stories about when she was a child, about her family, her experiences through the Depression and World War 2. Some of these stories I would ask her to retell over and over again. In the retelling of these stories my mother was reconnected with the people, places and memories of her past and in the listening and sharing I somehow became a part of the story – I could place myself in the picture or identify with different people or events.

Communal stories are vitally important too, for building a sense of identity, meaning and shared purpose. Every Sunday we retell and remember the story at the heart of our communal life – the story of the paschal mystery. Throughout the year we revisit other foundational stories in the Scriptures, each time engaging with a life, a place, an event in a new way.

Anzac Day is a sacred day of remembrance and retelling of a story that is foundational to our nation's history and sense of identity. It is a reminder of the terrible cost of war, but also reminds us of who we are as a nation in the face of tragedy, fear and threat.

It is a day in which the past, the present and the future are all brought together in a way that leads many into a place of deep reflection. As we remember the sacrifices made and the scars left of our national psyche by wars past, we are also very conscious of the Australian men and women serving in our defence forces around the world still today – many of whom face great danger every day. We also reflect upon the future – will we never see an end to the tragedy, brutality and pain of war? Is it destined to be a part of the human experience forever? How long to see the vision of the prophet Micah become a reality:

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 anymore.

As Christian Australians, this causes us to reflect deeply about how we are to speak to, and engage with, such a powerful ritual of remembrance as Anzac Day. How do we speak the gospel into situations of warfare, how do we minister to those in the defence forces and their families, how do we respond to a decision to go to war, or to send troops into a hostile situation?

It throws up all sorts of questions and tensions doesn't it?

Is there such a thing as a just war? This was the question asked by Bishop Tom Frame when Australia made the decision to enter the war in Iraq. There were sincere and faithful Christians who spoke on both sides of that question. How do we hold to the command to love one another whilst entering into armed conflict – and yet, how can we hold to that same command, to love one another, and then stand silently by through horrors such as ethnic cleansing by one group or nation over another?

The decision to take up arms or not in a situation of international conflict is never an easy one. It is not made lightly at a governmental level, and it is a heavy burden on a personal level.

Both choices take great courage and sacrifice. Those who choose the path of the pacifist in times of war must bear the legal and the social consequences of the stand they take. In our nation's history pacifists have been imprisoned, they have borne ridicule and the lack of understanding from others, they have been branded as being "un Australian" and as traitors to their country.

Those who choose to join the military conflict face death every day – their own and that of those whom they kill. The cost mentally, emotionally and physically cannot be measured.

Is one choice right and the other wrong? I think both are right for different reasons. We must honour, respect and give thanks both for those who have and continue to choose the pacifist stand, and those who have and continue to choose to serve in our defence forces, knowing that they may have to go to war. This country needs both pacifists and those who are willing to serve in our defence forces, held in tension together, each helping to make us who we are.

As a nation today, we remember, with regret and deep grief, the tragic, overwhelming cost of war – the cost in human life, the destruction of the natural environment, the scarring, emotionally and mentally, of whole generations, the evil unleashed by weapons of war and the need for power.

We share in the grief of those who have lost loved ones, who have had their lives uprooted, those who have suffered terrible deprivations because of war through the last century up to the present moment. As Christians we enter into this pain and grief in a very particular way, through the cross, and we can minister to others in a way that brings meaning, comfort and peace of heart. We can also draw on this day of remembrance as an inspiration to continue working for justice and peace in our local communities, our nation and the world.

As a nation we also honour the courage and self-sacrifice shown by so many in conflicts through the generations – the moments of grace, the stories of perseverance, redemption and salvation against all odds, the seeds and signs of hope visible amidst the horror and chaos of war.

As Christians we are called to name and honour the healing, life-giving work of Christ in our lives, our communities, our nation and the world. We are to model and encourage forgiveness and reconciliation and to celebrate it when we see it happening around us. We are to proclaim the kingdom of God and the risen Christ and that in him we have wholeness and abundant life.

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In Micah's vision the weapons of war are transformed into tools of life. I think one of the most encouraging and hopeful things about our national defence forces is the amount of work they do that is constructive and life giving. They are involved in such things as peace keeping in different countries, the distribution of aid and food relief, in the rebuilding of schools, hospitals and community housing, and in the clearing of land

and sea mines. In this we catch a glimpse of Micah's vision, and we need to encourage and support those who are serving not only our country but the good of many nations, in this way.

And we need to pray regularly for our defence force chaplains who minister to and care for our defence personnel and their families through often difficult circumstances.

And so we lift up our nation and the nations of the world before God this day.

We pray that the Spirit of life and peace may reign in our hearts and in our lives and that we may serve Christ with love, integrity, courage and humility in our witness to him.

The Lord be with you.