

Myths, memories and making peace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 25 April, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Easter 4B (ANZAC Day)

The peace of wild things by Wendell Berry; John 10: 11-18

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

May I speak in the name of the God of peace, whose love transforms all ills and renews us as one.

One of things I'm thankful for in my years of ministry is the memorial cross I helped install in the Warriors Chapel in St Luke's Church in Toowoomba. It remembers the battle of Meewah, otherwise known as One Tree Hill, or Table Top Mountain. This was part of the devastating Frontier Wars in this country. It was led, on the Aboriginal side, by the great warrior Multuggerah - and was part of deep, and extraordinarily skilled schemes of resistance. It is intimately connected to the continuing debilitating impact of colonial dispossession. For without remembering and reconciling, such deep wounds endure. Sadly, so little of this story is named or reflected upon.

In contrast, on this day (25 April), the awful pain of the Gallipoli landings is recalled - often, in recent years, with exceptional noise and attention. Why is it that some stories of terrible pain and hurt become enduring, and even enlarged, myths, whilst others, no less historically significant, are hidden or left to fester? How do we, as a whole, make peace with our past? And how do myths and memories of faith distract or assist? How does the Gospel we shared today help us on our journey on ANZAC Day - and in other areas?

Even after twenty years in Australia, I have to admit that, for me, ANZAC Day is a difficult occasion on which to speak - either personally or corporately. I am clear that there can be no simple time limit on marking terrible loss and grief. I understand what a profound effect the loss of lives had on still recently declared new nations, facing major challenges, with small populations scattered across great distances. I understand that the events of Gallipoli and ANZAC Cove connect with other deep sufferings, and that heroic human virtues are present which can continue to strengthen us all.

All that makes sense - and why people are gathered in the centre of this city today, as well as in other places to pray, to remember and to ask for renewal. Such memories are important not to forget. Much of ANZAC Day is also about myth. Myth, however, primarily in the constructive sense of making meaning and symbols that can strengthen us - in a similar way to how religion employs particular vital stories and symbols to help us cope with destruction and find new life. I also honour the sense of something sacred which so many find in rituals such as the dawn ceremonies, such powerful representations of Australian civic religion.

It is impossible not to be moved – even by the preparations - as Penny and I walked from the bus through what was happening around us in the city, without knowing that there was something rich and deep and powerful about ANZAC Day.

However, I have to say that I struggle with ANZAC Day too. I know that others within our community do too. As an immigrant, it is not easy to identify with, and can be even alienating when it gets too much wrapped in the flag and associated with militarism. As an English person, with my own native country's experiences of tragic loss in war and the infliction of pain on others across our world. I have been surprised, sometimes how little it connects with the pain of others.

Happily, more acknowledgement is now made of the pain of Turkish people that is bound up with the ANZAC story. But there are other aspects. Almost four times as many British soldiers died at Gallipoli as ANZACs combined. More French soldiers were killed than Australians. 5 000 Indians lost their lives or were wounded, and many other nationalities too. Of course the numbers are not proportionate to populations and it is right that nations mark their particular hurts. But I do wonder whether that multi-cultural aspect might enrich us as we move forward.

ANZAC commemorations, sometimes, can feel a little cut off from some of the world's wider pain, then and now. Rarely mentioned, for example, are the appalling Armenian Massacres which happened at the very same time as the ANZAC suffering. The virtues of ANZACs are rightly highlighted, but do we pay enough consideration to their context, I wonder? What on earth happened, for example, to take those young men to their deaths? Have we no lessons to draw, do you think, from the tyrannies, the rampant economic and social injustices, lack of international solidarity, the imperialism and nationalism which drew nations into that awful global conflict?

If we are rightly moved by ANZAC, (and we must be) how will we also organise our lives and world afresh to diminish those powers and reduce such pain and conflict today? I posted a photo of the notice on our notice board out front: *Lest we forget – anyone!* And someone on my Facebook page said: "*You know, a journalist was drummed out of Australia for saying something similar!*" It is a reminder that, even if you ask questions about ANZAC, it can cause conflict amongst us.

I offer these things in the spirit of inviting us to think, in this emerging of life, of how can we do peace better in the future, building on what we already have? Because, if we are to be serious about ANZAC, we also have to look at our Christian Gospel for fresh life of faith. How, for example, does today's gospel speak to us? After all, it is, infamously, far too easy, simply to elide the deaths of those in wars and tragedies with Jesus' words about '*laying down my life for the sheep.*' Too easy to make them the same thing.

What do we mean by 'sacrifice'?

In the little northern town where I was born, a mother raised six sons – in a part of Barnard Castle known, for very good reason, as Poor House Yard. All six enlisted in the army in 1916, and, within just over a year, five were dead. Can you imagine the pain? The community rallied, and the vicar's wife wrote to Queen Mary, who eventually helped move the remaining son away from the frontline. Happily, part of our enduring hope, Wilfrid lived and his granddaughter still lives in the town. Yet Wilfrid's parents were thrown back into poverty. When the town's war memorial was dedicated, his mother, shorn of her other five sons, laid the first wreath, but was described by the local newspaper (understandably) as a 'pathetic figure'.

At least two other English mothers suffered the same fate. In a Lincoln vicarage, near where I grew up, Amy Beechey raised eight sons, five of whom were killed in the Great War. In April 1918, she was presented to the King and Queen, and thanked for her immense sacrifice. *'It was no sacrifice, ma'am'*, she gently but firmly replied, *'I did not give them willingly'*.

The third mother, Annie Souls, also had five sons wrenched away by the same war. She refused ever after to stand for the national anthem, except once, at a school concert, so as not to embarrass a granddaughter. She had to leave her village after the war, to avoid gossip about how she would profit from the pensions given to her for her sons. Her remaining son then died soon after, of meningitis.

How do we remember such pain? We must remember such pain, with the ANZACS, and all that goes with them and all the stories that are sometimes told in war and in the conflicts since. But how can we easily speak of *'sacrifice'*, and simply focus on the deaths of young men which were the result of many wider forces of which we hardly ever speak? That's why our church noticeboard puts it as it does today. If we are to remember, let us remember all. *'Lest we forget'* indeed, but *'lest we forget...anyone'*.

Does the Biblical image of the good shepherd help, do you think? It is a tricky thing, isn't it? Particularly in the context of the Frontier Wars I mentioned earlier. For, as historians have pointed out,^[1] sheep may have become an essential source of food for early colonists, but they literally occupied the land, multiplied the population and disrupted prior ownership and ecological balance.

So sheep were tokens of invasion, even though they are at the heart of our Biblical faith. No wonder so many were killed by Aboriginal people, not just for food but as part of political and symbolic resistance. Meanwhile, colonial shepherds were literally the frontline of European expansion. No wonder their huts and lives were central to the warfare of this land – even though they may have meant no ill at all!

What then are we to do today with the Biblical shepherd and sheep images, including the words about sacrifice? Meredith Lake pointed out (in her book *The Bible in Australia*) that early missionaries struggled with this. So we might. Threlkeld and his Awabakal colleague Biraban thus opted to find alternative, more indigenous, images. So, instead of saying *"the Lord is my Shepherd"* in Psalm 23, they replaced the word with an Awabakal word *'wirrilli'*. This related to the Aboriginal practice of winding up fishing lines, and opossum for cords, so as to care and protect them. So, the point, the Biblical meaning of the divine shepherd isn't the shepherds and the sheep themselves is it? It's the care. The infinite care which is bound up with sustaining life and food and community.

Perhaps we have to do something similar if we are to renew our myths and our memories and thereby make for greater peace? At the very least, we have to reflect more deeply when we come to times of remembrance, and to today's Gospel text.

So, how do they speak to us, and how might they speak afresh? The shepherd image isn't easy for many of us urban folk today, is it? Yet it still holds renewing power if we approach it properly. Three helpful features certainly help me – admittedly resonating with my own particular experiences of living and working with sheep farmers on the northern hills of my birth...

Firstly, and above all, Jesus' point was not about shepherds in general! It was about the good shepherd. Think about it! We are to put the good shepherd alongside the Good Samaritan. There is a comparison here and there is a challenge to our assumptions and our stereotypes about what we think of shepherds – who were looked down on in the ancient world.

Jesus is not offering us a simple image of a fluffy, cuddly, protector figure in the shepherd. No, Jesus is speaking out of situations of profound conflict, even violence. There is theft, there is prejudice, there is economic and colonial injustice, and all sorts of things mixed up when Jesus is speaking about sheep and shepherds. The good shepherd is therefore an unexpected figure, much though some Hebrew scriptures point towards them. The good shepherd overturns our ideas of what care and protection in leadership might be. Instead of looking at the powerful, we might look at the Aboriginal person, unwinding carefully that fishing line. That sort of analogy.

Secondly, the good shepherd is inextricably identified with their people and land. They do not stand over them. They are juxtaposed by Jesus in this story, with the thieves – who he intends us to understand, are the people who are thieving the land and the things of the people. He's talking about the Romans, the invaders and colonialists, the run-of-the-mill politicians and the rapacious business people, who were ripping people off. In contrast, the good shepherd (the good politician if you like), is the one who lays down their life for others, not out of fear or for money, but out of their own will, through the love and grace of God.

Thirdly, the love of the good shepherd is therefore profoundly resilient, resistant, and, ultimately, triumphal - like the good politicians and the good people who change our world even though they seem a bunch of rogues as well. Because, for all the passions and rages of the thieves of our world, with all their power and violence, Jesus is saying there is a power of divine, costly, love –and it is embodied in people around you that can transform it. And it is embodied in me.

So, do we see the good shepherd in our world?

I do, including in some of the literal shepherds I have known. I mention politicians because I have met one or two lately whom I believe are good politicians in this sense. They can be easily despised and overlooked, but they identify with the needs of others and their land, and, thanks to the grace of God, they develop and display resilience about the things which truly matter. They have faith. They have love. They have commitment. They keep working for peace and reconciliation, come what may, whatever the powers of this world do to them.

We are called by God into that deeper company and that great vision of peaceful transformation which the Bible calls shalom.

Let me bring this to a close. How is such shalom to be embodied? How do we see this shalom? Have we seen it? Well, we come back to what memories we recall don't we, and which myths we share, and how we share them?

The Battle of One Tree Hill memorial cross (pictured below) certainly offers us one step to move forward in peacemaking in our land, and beyond. It's an encouragement to us to think of ways that we can move too.

It was the work of the remarkable Aboriginal artist Uncle Colin Isaacs, best known for the imaging and art used along the memorial walkway of the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial Site. He creates these images, he says, not for art's sake alone, but as a form of communication. Rather like this amazing opera that we had here, who didn't just do this for art, but because they are connected to social justice to use art to creatively engage with others. So, the cross, like Aboriginal art, like the opera, is to convey relationships to history and the life experiences.

The Battle of One Tree Hill cross is an invitation to us to share and deepen our memories and to work on more life-giving myths, in closer relationship with others. I think ANZAC Day can be part of this too – if we continue to work at it and be bold.

How might we picture peace and reconciliation among us today, do you think? On Uncle Colin's cross, the two arms represent, respectively, the deep culture of this land and its various diverse peoples. On the vertical arm, the warrior stands for Multuggerah, but also for all Aboriginal people of strength, wisdom and courage, who love their land and its Spirit. The snake represents the Spirit moving in creation, underpinning everything. The horizontal arms represent European and other settler cultures, less deep in Australia yet still real and important, and often with a deep connection to the land like so many farmers have.

At the heart of the cross is Meewah, the Table Top Mountain, which, together with the birds of peace, is a source of unity in our shared land. I wonder whether we might also see the Aboriginal figure as a Christ figure on that cross. Even as a Good Shepherd – transforming what has been a negative image into a positive one, offering us strength and healing. The tree at the heart of the cross can also remind us of the tree of life and the tree of reconciliation of Jesus. The flags, like the two arms at the ends, represent all our different peoples, yet brought together in one.

That is the aim. That is the hope. That is the reality into – with those who remember ANZAC Day here and elsewhere - we walk together.

May God and all that is good in all that we have been, are, and can be, continue to bless us in all our life-giving myths, memories and making peace.

Amen.



^[1] See, for example, Dr Christopher Mayes of Deakin University, as reported in <https://www.eterinitynews.com.au/australia/how-the-lamb-chop-ruined-australia/>