

A Captured God?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 2 July 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Ben Skerman

Pentecost 4A

Genesis 22: 1-14; Romans 6: 12-23; Contemporary Reading:

“The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” by Wilfred Owen

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

I started work on this reflection when Kim Jong Eun and President Trump were playing chicken with nuclear weapons. One misjudgement, one burst of bravado could have had unthinkable consequences. Seoul is 5 minutes by fighter from the DMZ, Pyongyang maybe 20. A ballistic missile from the North is probably not more than a few minutes away. Retaliation from a submarine, the 7th fleet, or US Air Bases on Okinawa, or Guam would be quick. 10 million people vaporised in Seoul, followed by another 2 to 3 million in Pyongyang, followed by....

This is already a higher death toll than World War I.

The 2nd of July, today, in 1916, 101 years ago saw the Battle of the Somme enter its third day. In its first 12 hours, the 13 attacking British Divisions lost 57,000 men, 19,000 of them killed outright. The plan of campaign had been settled late in 1915 and involved simultaneous attacks in the East by Russia, the South by Italy and the West by Britain and France. The Somme had no value other than that was where the British and French armies joined and the French thought the British had not been pulling their weight. Simultaneous attacks would crush Germany like an orange in a vice.

It was not to be. The Germans attacked Verdun in February to bleed France white (which nearly succeeded), and did a fair bit of bleeding themselves until the campaign ended in November. The Russian attack was successful, the Italian one failed. By the time the Somme campaign petered out in the winter rains of November, Britain had lost 420,000 men, France 194,000 and Germany 465,000. An advance of less than 10Km.

100 years ago, today action had moved from the Somme to the ancient Belgian Cloth City of Ypres. The Battle of Messines was coming to an end. The Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) was being planned. In 1914 the Royal Navy placed a distant blockade on Germany denying them not only war materials but food. This was highly successful and was maintained until well after the armistice in November in 1918 to ensure that the thought and sight of starving women and children in Germany would ensure the delegation would sign the Treaty of Versailles. The German response to the blockade was submarine warfare. Unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 had reduced Britain's wheat supply to 6 weeks. One of the selling points in getting approval to the Third Battle of Ypres was that success would result in capturing the Belgian submarine ports.

The battle commenced on the 31st July. Both sides had learned from previous campaigns. A week's bombardment had theoretically softened the German lines; high explosive shells to destroy earthworks, shrapnel to destroy barbed wire, chlorine and phosgene gas to kill any survivors. The Germans also had learned; the front line was lightly held with pill boxes armed with machine guns and interlocking lines of fire, and the main force three lines back ready to counter attack. The attack was at first successful with infantry advancing with portable bridges to cross creeks and drainage canals while being protected with box barrages. Then it rained; the worst rains in 60 years. The boggy ground turned into a quagmire. Ammunition dumps and guns sank into the mud. Soldiers, who on the Somme could seek shelter in shell holes, at Ypres got caught in glutinous mud and slowly drowned. The battle petered out in October at the remains of the village of Passchendaele. A photograph shows Canadian machine gunners, near the village, ensconced in what appears to be bubbles in a porridge of mud.

The Submarine ports were not captured; the submarine menace had been defeated by the introduction of convoys. Not even the crest of the slope was reached. It is difficult to get information on casualties. The consensus seems to be 260,000 on each side.

When the war broke out, some people like the poet Rupert Brooke believed war would be a cleansing experience: "*May God be thanked who has blessed us with this hour*". Each of the combatant countries believed they had God on their side. Their form of government, their societies, their colonies had divine sanction. Holy Icons were paraded through the ranks of the Russian Army, the Grand Muftis of Constantinople and Jerusalem preached Jihad in support of the Ottoman Turks. The Germans were fighting for a Christian culture. The British had positive proof of divine support. They saw the heavenly host massing in the clouds to defend them in their fighting retreat from Mons in 1914. God was everywhere – and God was supporting everyone.

Mr Punch commented on the constant references to God with the following verse:

*"Gott Strafe England, God save the King,
God this God That, God every.... thing.
'My God', said God, 'I've got my work cut out!'"*

As casualties mounted and close relatives and friends were killed or maimed, the enemy became demonised, by both sides. A vengeful Old Testament God came to the fore. This came from a contemporary sermon:

'Kill Germans! Kill them! ... Not for the sake of killing, but to save the world... Kill the good as well as the bad ... Kill the young as well as the old... Kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded as well as those fiends who crucified the Canadian Sergeant... I look upon it as a war of purity; I look upon everybody who dies in it as a martyr'. The preacher was the Right Rev Dr Arthur Winnington - Ingram, Bishop of London. The place St Pauls Cathedral. The Canadian Sergeant was a piece of black propaganda, which was widely believed

When the war ended in November 1918 more than 3 million civilians had died; 250,000 Serbians frozen to death as they fled their country across the mountains to the Adriatic Coast over the winter of 1915/16; 1 million Armenians who were moved away from Turkey's eastern borders because they were Christian and might fraternise with the army of Holy Mother Russia. 1 million African bearers died of disease while supporting the armies fighting it out in East Africa.

However, these were all foreigners. Most concern was for sons, brothers, husbands, fathers who had died in the various armed forces. Britain lost 720,000 dead, the Dominions another 200,000 (60,000 were Australian). Austria Hungary lost half as many again as Britain, France twice as many, Russia twice as many. Germany three times as many. The wounded were probably triple these numbers. The effect on families is incalculable.

Why had they died? What was it for? Memorials sprang up in churches and town halls, in parks, and in war graves near the battle fields. Captions declared in my father's church, that "*they had died for God, King and Country, for King and Empire, had paid the supreme sacrifice, had laid down their lives for their friends, and that their names would live forever*". Universities and high schools had inscriptions in Greek comparing them to the Spartans who had been killed to the last man defending Greece at Marathon, or in Latin: "*Dulces et amabile pro patria morit est*". It is sweet and lovely to die for your country.

Interpretations of have changed over the decades. In the 1920s when the view was that the war had been a disastrous accident: they had died in a war to end all wars. In Australia, New Zealand and Canada their deaths were the foundations of new nations. By the sixties with the musical "*Oh What a Lovely War*" they had all been conned by incompetent and hypocritical generals and died for nothing. More recently, democracy, freedom, and mateship have all been cited. Underlying them all, and in the Anzac and Armistice Day celebrations, is a sense of deep grief, even a hundred years later. There are few triumphant memorials of prancing horses and waving flags. The theme is sacrifice. Their sacrifice is identified with that of Christ. (Probably to the great surprise of the soldiers.)

There are conflicting interpretations of our Genesis reading, the sacrifice of Isaac. Is it a story about God testing Abraham's faith, or about ending the practice of human sacrifice as a religious ritual? Isaac's birth was semi miraculous. He was his father's most precious possession yet he was willing to give him up to God. In the end God provides a ram as a substitute. This is interpreted a by some that God does not test you beyond endurance - the ultimate sacrifice is not required. This is not the view of Isaiah in his description of the suffering servant. There was no lamb in the thicket at Golgotha, and it was ignored in Wilfrid Owen's poem that we read earlier - where people died for the pride of their country's generals and politicians.

The prohibition of human sacrifice took some time. Remember the story in Judges of the victorious general Jephthah promising to make a thank offering of the first thing that greeted him on his return. It was his daughter. The Prophets railed against child human sacrifice as the Assyrians, Syrians and Persians wiped out the tribes of Israel one by one. The Kings of Judah and Israel both sacrificed their sons. Others, in the words of the Bible, passed their children 'through the fire' to have a bet each way with Baal and Yahweh. Nevertheless, human sacrifice was replaced by the sacrifice of specified animals in specified volumes as guilt and thank offerings to God. The prophets didn't like this much either. In Rome animal sacrifices were known as Holocausts - a word which now has an even darker meaning.

Our second reading compares the life of righteousness available to those who follow Christ and that of the alternative of sin - whose wages are death. Like much religious language righteousness and sin are terms which have been greatly degraded. Righteousness you can see any day in Parliamentary Question time. Sin is any pleasurable and harmless or harmful activity that has been condemned by the church.

Perhaps working definitions might be:

Righteousness is an attempt to live a selfless life in accordance with a set of moral and ethical principles which emphasise the common good. In the case of Christians these principles come from the life of Christ. A righteous person does not advertise their righteousness and is perhaps not even aware of it.

Sin is a life lived for self-interest in which moral and ethical principles can be violated as required.

We are all both righteous and sinful. In Sydney Alliance parlance, we are all somewhere on a *continuum between self-interest and altruism*. Richard Holloway rephrases it as *a continuum between Monster and Saint*. We have done or believed things, on this continuum, which we cringe about. This is true of the Church, the body of Christ, society, and the state.

Often what is virtuous in one generation is regarded with abhorrence by future generations. We cannot always predict what this will be. An example is the *"stolen generations"*. The forceful or otherwise removal of aboriginal children from their families goes back to the time of Governor Macquarie. People knew about it. People thought it was good. Ernestine Hill, a journalist of the 30s and 40s describes such a removal in a book: *'Two at Daly Waters': The aboriginal camp and the few whites got boundless joy from an aboriginal toddler. The authorities came and took the child away. There was intense grief in both communities but the white community consoled themselves that it was for the best; being cruel to be kind. The camp had a high infant mortality rate; a western education would make the child a useful citizen.*

Progressive Theologians decry the evil of empire. We are all beneficiaries of empire. Without it none of us would be here: American, Canadian, Kiwi or Australian. There are at least three rationales for Empire which were accepted as righteous by our grandparents and great grandparents, perhaps by our parents, and perhaps from time to time, even by ourselves.

In the mid-1950s as a ten-year-old with his first stiff collar, I suffered through the 75th Anniversary Services of two churches in townships on the Darling Downs. They had each been built by free selectors who had taken over parts of large sheep runs in the 1880s. The preacher, Prof Lloyd Gearing, now a knight and an eminent progressive theologian, spoke on Abraham and his family and flocks following God to a promised land. The hymn was, of course, *'Thy hand Oh God has guided Thy flock from age to age'*. These sentiments resonated with everyone there - this could be their family histories, including mine. Australia was a land of milk and honey - even for the convicts. Europeans were God's chosen people. Pity about the first peoples.

Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia of 1924 had theological justification for dispossession: the parable of the talents. *The first peoples had not developed their land. They had therefore forfeited it to people who would. In the King James version, the parable ends with; 'to him that hath shall more be given and for him that hath not even the little that he hath shall be taken away'*. This sort of argument was used in the 1990s by the mining industry and others in combatting the idea of a native title. What happened to social justice?

Social Justice was addressed by Rudyard Kipling in a poem welcoming the US to the world of Imperialism after it took over Spain's Empire in the Spanish American War of 1899, and then had to reconquer the Philippines. "Take up the white man's burden" of civilising the native peoples who are "half devil and half child".

Civilising involved: western medicine and justice systems, education, railways, the elimination of some pernicious local customs, a great deal of patronising, exploitation and evangelism. It was seen as the beginning of the creation of God's Kingdom on earth. It also gave national prestige and access to markets and access to raw materials.

There is a problem with any one, or any group being absolutely certain they are doing God's will. God is too big to be captured. Self-interest and altruism get confused. In some cases, zeal about doing God's will results in ignoring the means. The means justifies the ends and includes the violation of moral and ethical guidelines: murder, genocide, theft.

There are numerous examples of this. The Crusader in 1089, wading through the streets of Jerusalem, ankle deep in blood, killing everyone he sees, Jew, Muslim, or Christian, and crying 'Deus Ult', 'God Wills It'. Nearly a thousand years later the Crusades have not been forgotten or forgiven in the Middle East as President George Bush discovered in 2003 when he described the invasion of Iraq as a crusade. The response: Jihad - which has the same range of meanings as crusade from moral campaigns to war.

The Christian who believes abortion is a sin against God and Man, and blows up clinics and kills obstetricians. The Zionist Settler on the West Bank who believes the only good Palestinian is a dead one (a view which many of settlers in this country and elsewhere once upon a time held; the young person who sees the world as such a sinful place that it needs to be destroyed or shocked into virtue, by getting in an explosive laden car or wearing an explosive belt and killing as many people as possible in Manchester, London, Paris, Tel Aviv, Baghdad, Bali....

Perhaps this is what is described in the New Testament as the unforgiveable sin, the sin against the Holy Ghost, the belief that you are God. And, demonstrably, in this case the wages for this sin is death for the zealots and everyone around them.

Let us pray:

We are faced with many challenges.

Keep us humble as we choose which to address,

keep us from demonising our opponents,

and keep us ever mindful of unwanted side effects

in our choice of solutions and actions.

Amen