

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Anzac Day

Presented by David Kerr

Introduction

During the war the English became aware of a new kind of man, unlike any usually seen here. They were not Europeans; they were not Americans. They seemed to be of one race, for all of them had the same bearing, and something of the same look of humorous, quick decision. On the whole they were taller, broader, better looking and more graceful in their movements than other races. Yet in spite of so much power and beauty, they were very friendly people; easy to get on with, most helpful kindly and hospitable.... Since that time (Gallipoli) the Australian Army has become famous all over the world as the finest army engaged in the Great War.

So wrote John Masefield, British War Correspondent and future Poet Laureate of England after World War I.

Many suggest that Australia's proud fighting qualities in World War I helped to define us as a nation and Anzac Day is subsequently embedded in our culture as a memorial and testimony to these celebrated times and the many other defining moments of war that now colour our history.

However, there are some who protest about our involvement in war, and question the continuance of Anzac Day. Today I want to look at the part Anzac Day plays in our life. Is it right to continually revisit yesterday and retell stories from the world's dark past?

Part 1

Anzac Day is celebrated as one of the significant events in the Australian calendar. We are granted a holiday on the day it falls, April 25. It is given as a time to remember those lives that were sacrificed, so we could live in a free country and a free world. A time to reflect and celebrate again victory over the enemy.

Not everyone in our community supports this time of thanksgiving celebration and reflection. From time to time anti-war protesters raise their voices. There was rumoured in March 2003 that anti-war activists may disrupt Anzac Day commemorations, bringing a quick response from the RSL, condemning such interference as an "almost sacrilegious act".

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said that any protesters who tried to ambush veterans marching on April 25 would be abhorred by the government.

How significant is Anzac Day for you? Some suggest that while it's important to have a national day of commemoration, it can end up glorifying war. What do you think?

I want to suggest to you that it is important to maintain Anzac Day. There is great value in **remembering**. What should we remember? The horrors of war? Many Australians are familiar with the tragic failure of Gallipoli. Fewer are aware of what the Allied forces faced, including many Australians, on the Western Front during that war. Jules Romains in his epic novel *Verdun*, describes the horror of attrition as a tactic:

But a war of attrition. The very thought tears the guts out of a man. It means thinking of the enemy opposite as a dense layer made up of "millions of soldiers." No good now breaking through at a simple point. The whole front has got to be nibbled away... It must be filed thin, scraped, worn down, must be made up no more than a wood shaving made up of millions of men", dead men, mutilated men, men turned into so much sawdust. To produce such an effect will be the work of months, demanding the patience of a saint..... At times it seems as though the thickness of those lines opposite remains undiminished.... the back areas that grow empty as every available man is moved up to repair the wastage are not inexhaustible. The men they provide are far fewer than those killed at the front... The war will come to an end when the fellows opposite have come to the end of their resources...

Romains continues, " at any rate the great thing is to kill as many of the fellows opposite as possible... just kill because the more dead there are, the fewer living will remain... But if victory is to be sure, attrition must not be confined to the enemy's armies. It must extend to his rear as well. The rapid destruction of his front-line troops is but one aspect of the problem. It is necessary to calculate also the progress made by cold and hunger among his civilian population, the exhaustion of the natural resources of his country." So, was the great war of attrition.

Part 2

Today I'm talking about the importance of Anzac Day. While it has been established as a significant day of commemoration in our nation, some suggest we would do better, letting go of the past and getting on with the future. They say "let's get on with it."

I have said it is important to remember the past. Churchill said that one thing we have not learnt..... is that we have not learnt from history. Sebastian Faulks, in his magnificent and deeply moving account of the conditions on the Western Front in Belgium and France in World War I, describes with brutal and chilling frankness the unthinkable conditions the troops faced. Living, if you could call it living, was moment by moment. When you could return for brief respite to a local village, in spite of the multiple showers, the troops stank of the mud, excrement, and rotting bodies that became a sea in which they were immersed for weeks at a time.

It was an unforgettable experience to walk solemnly through the POW camp at Dachau, on the outskirts of Munich some years ago. To see the ovens where bodies were burned, put my finger in the nozzle of the gas jets in the chamber where thousands of Jews were asphyxiated, is indelibly etched into my mind.

It is important to remember the horrors of the past. I saw the recent film "Joyeux Noel" which provides some insight into the conditions in the trenches on the Western Front. It commences with two young Scottish men, relieved and welcoming the war. Their joy and enthusiasm is met with tears from an older and wiser priest, foreknowing the darkness of what was likely to come. The enthusiasm of young men in England and Europe on either side of the war, soon turned into despair, as opposing forces were gridlocked for years in a hopeless war of attrition.

The sad and horrific images that stay with us from those dark days of our history can serve to make us resolute to work passionately and constructively for peace. To allow the pictures to be emptied from our minds is to run the risk of easily being seduced into a mindset that will repeat the mistakes of the past.

The children of Israel had problems with their memory too. Many times Moses reminded them on their journey to the Promised Land, that it was their God, who had delivered them out of slavery in Egypt. It was God who helped them to survive the great journey to their new home. However, over time, they were seduced into making a golden image of a calf, to worship, which incurred the wrath of God.

"How could they do such a thing?" you ask. One reason, they forgot the terrible conditions they lived under in Egypt. Their momentary discomfort dulled their minds and they lost their way.

Man lost his way a long time ago. The division between man and his brother goes back to the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. Our disharmony and strife flows from our rebellion against God. War has never been and never will be part of God's best solution for our world. The Old Testament records how God used war to achieve His purposes, but in the New, offers a better way.

Part 3

Anzac Day is celebrated as one of the significant days in the Australian calendar. Today, I'm discussing its importance and relevance, amongst voices that protest that "we should not glory in war," or "commemorating war keeps us chained to the past," and "we need to move on."

I have said that it is important to remember what has gone before. Remembering is the first step in learning from the past for what we need for the future.

Remembering the past helps us to keep our perspective in the present. Also, as we remember and acknowledge our gratitude for their sacrifice, we affirm their intentions beliefs and values, their courage and sense of justice. As we validate them, we are challenged ourselves, to ensure that we thoughtfully and conscientiously maintain their spirit in the age in which we live. We are required to learn from the past and to ensure that we are defensive and not aggressive, that we work to secure and remedy justice, protect the innocent and champion human rights.

However, there is also another life that was sacrificed that we should never forget. We need to remember what John Newton, the English slave trader said he would never forget. John Newton was born in London on July 24, 1725.

After his mother died when he was seven, he was captured by a press gang and joined his father at sea at age eleven. After his life went downhill, he became the captain of a slave ship. He transported slaves from Africa to America. On March 10, 1748, a storm frightened him so badly that he called out to God for mercy. He remembered his childhood faith. Finally that inner storm gave him the opportunity to give up the slave trade. At age 39, he became a priest of the Church of England. He wrote many hymns, including one called "Amazing Grace", to tell how God's love changed his life. Before every service, as he left the vestry to enter the sanctuary, he looked up at the verse from the book of Deuteronomy 15:15 that he had carved across the arch of the doorway. "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and d the Lord your God redeemed you." That was the truth that kept John Newton on course.

As we face our future, whatever it holds, we need take hold of the One who fought the battle of all time against our common enemy, Satan and won a resounding victory on the cross, securing our freedom forever through faith in Christ's atoning death.

At the last supper, Jesus took bread and said, "This is my body and then the wine, "This is my blood" eat and drink in remembrance of me until I return.

Conclusion

Anzac Day is a day when we honour those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. It not a time to glorify war, but an opportunity to reflect and learn from the mistakes of the past and commit ourselves to work and pray for peace, a peace that God will be pleased to bless. We each have the responsibility to work and pray for peace, and to know that it starts with you and me.

*Dear Lord,
Let there be peace on earth
and let it begin with me,
knowing that real peace comes
when I find my peace in You.*