

ANZAC Day

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Reverend Rebecca Newland

25 April 2010

Today is of course ANZAC day. The day when we remember the service men and women who have sacrificed so much for those they love. War is horrific. It is bloody and cruel. One of my forebears was on the Somme—it was the smell of dead bodies, the blood, vomit, faeces, the rats and disease and the ever present fear of defeat and death that ate away at their soul and brought them untold pain and suffering for the rest of their lives. It is right and proper to remember the men and women who have suffered in all the wars this country has been engaged in. We need always honour their duty and service. We need to remember ANZAC day because we need to have a way of calling to mind the horror and cost of war. For me, if we are serious about it, it should have the same weight and solemnity as our Good Friday service.

However I do have a problem with what seems to go with ANZAC day – the phenomenon of nationalism. Nationalism is no benign force. Albert Einstein who was distressed that his theories were being used to create the atomic bomb famously said, “*Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind*”. But it is more insidious than this. It is an ideology and like all ideologies, all ‘isms’, it can take the place of God in our hearts. Dictators know what they are about when they preach nationalism. Adolf Hitler said, “*The effectiveness of the truly national leader consists in preventing his people from dividing their attention, and keeping it fixed on a common enemy.*” Nationalism is all about them and us. And when religion is co-opted into the ideology it is an unholy disaster.

Most of us value the culture which shaped our development and gave us our sense of personal and group identity but the nationalist agenda persuades us that the existence of other groups and cultures somehow puts these things at risk, and that the only way to protect them is to see ourselves as members of a distinct collective, defined by ethnicity, geography, or sameness of language or religion, and to build a wall around ourselves to keep out “foreigners”. It is not enough that the others are other; we have to see them as a threat at very least to “our way of life”. What gets set up is the same old pattern of scapegoating, violence and blame. In contrast to this we have before us the life of Jesus of Nazareth who as God himself sacrificed his life for us. In that sacrifice he opened our eyes and broke that pattern once and for all.

Sometimes the sacrifice of God in Jesus on the cross is likened to the sacrifice of the ANZACS or their sacrifice is likened to his. There are similarities between them. Both are about laying down ones life for the other. Both cost more than just a physical life. Both are heroic and courageous. But there are differences. One significant difference is that the sacrifice of Jesus opened up for us a new way, a living way, through his own body, as the letter to Hebrews puts it. The new way Christ opened up is not, and never was about them and us. Instead Christ is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life to bring abundant life to all—that is *all*—Australians, Turks, Germans, Iraqis, Koreans, Sri Lankans, Afghans, New Zealanders, the British, Americans—and all the rest—those in prison, in refugee camps, in villages in Nepal and ghettos in Palestine, and we sitting in these pews in O'Connor—all.

Surprisingly I think the Book of Revelation is a place where we can find a way to look at the violence of war square-on and discover the alternative vision from God. Revelation as you know is a type of apocalyptic literature, which is difficult to decipher even for careful readers. As a genre of writing that flourished from about 200 BC to 200 AD among both Jews (cf. Daniel 7–12) and Christians (cf. Mark 13), apocalyptic literature is characterized by visions, symbols, numerology, surreal beasts, and sea monsters, all strange, weird, wonderful

and confusing stuff. The book is the recording of a vision that came to John, on the island of Patmos, around AD 90, during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian. Just for the record, Domitian demanded that his subjects address him as “Lord and God”, and when Christians and others refused they were put to death.

The ideas that people have surrounding the Book of Revelation are frankly astounding and make you want to bury your head if you are a Christian. There are some great nutty web pages that make outrageous claims about the book and what it means. My favourite is the rapture index that each day tallies up all the disasters the world is experiencing and then gives a statistical probability that the events of the Apocalypse are about to happen. Interpretations like this happen because people try to read the book literally and in a linear fashion. Last week I mentioned that scholars are not sure what time the book refers to, as there are problems with past, present and future tenses in the book.

Revelation is a book of imagination and vision and the way to engage with it is with the imagination –not with the rational intellect that will struggle to understand it literally. An imaginative approach takes a birds eye view. We are, as it were, are caught up in the cosmic vision and we, as John did, see all of human history, destruction, suffering, salvation, deliverance, past, present and future all happening at once.

Just before the section we read today we hear about the heavenly chorus of elders and living creatures rejoicing because someone was found worthy to open the seven-seals-sealed-scroll (say *that* ten times). That someone was the slaughtered Lamb, Jesus Christ. The Lamb opens six of the seven seals, and with each of them various horrors appear. Kings and generals and the “rich and the powerful” hide in the mountains and caves, begging these inanimate objects to fall on them so that they could avoid the wrath lying wait in the open seals.

Chapter 7 then describes those who will be delivered from this great destruction. It includes the 144,000 Israelites and the “great multitude” of those who have survived the ordeal, who have been washed clean through the blood of the Lamb. This countless remnant, “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language” (7:9), then sing praises to God and the Lamb, rejoicing that there will finally be no more tears, no more hunger, no more suffering. They cry out, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (7:12). This verse is called the sevenfold Amen and incidentally is the verse which Handel uses to conclude *Messiah*.

We don’t just sing this work and we also don’t just immerse ourselves in the story and treat it like a thrilling, if not frightening ride. It also speaks to us about the human condition, the horrors of violence and abuse. Revelation might seem to us to be too negative about the present, earthly world, and too focused on a future, heavenly world. But perhaps we might think differently if Roman emperors like Nero or Domitian had slaughtered our family, or if Janjaweed militia (literally, “devils on horseback”) in Darfur had raped our women, strafed our villages with jets, then burned it to the ground, or our home in Iraq with all our family was bombed and everyone died. For people like this hell has come to earth.

The reality of the world is that there are 35 wars happening right today; there are three billion people in poverty suffering totally inhuman conditions that we can’t imagine; 850 million people starving right now—50 thousand people will starve to death today; there are 25 thousand nuclear weapons and no real movement toward nuclear disarmament; global warming a reality, there is the destruction of species and habitats, and then a whole litany of every other kind of violence you could think of from racism, sexism, to you name whatever you want—a world of violence.

Whether in ancient Rome or in modern Zimbabwe, the book of Revelation articulates the longing of people for God to intervene in human history and to make right all wrongs: “How long, O Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”

Revelation is one book that does not skirt around the issue of violence and makes us ask the tough questions about justice, about consequences and how we as followers of the Christ must respond. As Christians we are called to dream a different future. A future where there is no more injustice and where all people are lead to the springs of the water of life. At the centre of the vision is the slaughtered lamb.

What then does the symbol of the slaughtered lamb mean? Like all symbols it has multiple meanings. Standing with a cross and a gash in its side, it symbolizes the passion of Christ. Seated on a throne or a book, the lamb represents the judgment of Christ. One thing a lamb represents is innocence, gentleness and humility. Having a lamb as a symbol for your God seems quite incongruous. There is nothing strong and powerful about this picture. Of course in Exodus, a lamb is what the Hebrews killed to put on the lintels of their houses so the angel of death would Passover. The lamb then in Revelation is the Christ God as the innocent victim who allows himself to be killed by humans, pouring out human and divine blood, to reveal to us the horror of our idolatry, scapegoating and violence. And in place of violence there is peace. Instead of retaliation there is forgiveness. In place of them and us there is only one loving embrace of all. In classic understandings of the cross, Jesus died in our place for our sins and through his blood paid the debt that is owed by us.

This is why the remnant cry out, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen”. This is what we remember in the sacrifice of the Eucharist. This is what we yearn for and celebrate each day of our lives—uniting, forgiving and holy love, lest we forget. Amen.