

# Known unto God

Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (& ANZAC Day), 25 April 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

## **The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Acts 4: 5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3: 16-24; John 10: 11-18

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

When we have interstate or overseas houseguests who're up for some Canberra sightseeing, we always try to visit the Australian War Memorial. I show them those sobering memorial arcades with the names of our 100,000 Australian war dead—in each case just a name, listed under the conflict in which they perished, along with their unit or their ship. Then we go to the tomb of the unknown soldier, one of only two Australians killed in the Great War who found their way back. I always point out a plaque by the entrance with that marvellous speech by Prime Minister Paul Keating from 1993, when this anonymous ordinary Australian was welcomed home. We like to stay with visitors for the Last Post

ceremony when one fallen Australian is remembered and honoured each day, often in the presence of their family and descendants.

Earlier today at the War Memorial ANZAC Day began with the Dawn Service and later our veterans will gather and remember. Young Australians join in increasingly, too, looking back with a certain wonder—or perhaps envy—at young people like them who made their choice and stuck it out to the end, some living and some dying.

So many names, so many fragile memories, so much positivity in the face of war's trauma and, yes, even its futility. So much good-will, too, hoping that it all meant something, that it all contributed to a better day, that all those sacrifices served a greater good—that it wasn't all for nothing, with the dead consigned to oblivion. Yet French farmers still plough up anonymous human bones, while the psychological and moral costs for combatants and the trauma to civilians are still being counted. Lest we forget, indeed—lest we forget any of it, the good and the bad.

Friends, on ANZAC Day we see the sort of religious sentiment that survives in our post-Christian society where unbelief or disbelief are the norm. Because to face ANZAC's huge burden of death and the risk of forgetting without some attempt to muster up hope and positivity would be just too much. So with generic prayers and a nod to the Christian hope of eternal life, Australians engage in the only sort of religious yearning that the majority can still allow themselves—what Manning Clark called “a shy hope in the heart” —nothing too specific, and only vaguely Christian, though certainly well-intentioned. We want all those lives and deaths to have mattered. We couldn't bear the thought that they'll all become unknown soldiers, lost to memory.

Friends, the good news of this Easter Season is that these surviving religious instincts, even if for many they're mostly wishful thinking, do point to something true and abiding. ANZAC was a Christian-inspired commemoration after all, thanks to an Anglican priest from Brisbane Diocese called Canon David John Garland. He imagined ANZAC Day as

Australia's All Soul's Day, at a time when grief over the Great War was still raw, and the young nation needed an appropriately solemn commemoration. Today our country lives on the fumes of Christianity, but elements of that legacy remain visible on ANZAC Day—a good deal obscured and diminished no doubt but the need for hope remains.

I want to say today that the widespread hope clinging on to ANZAC Day is actually real: that the dead are safe from forgetting, and that there's more to history than Shakespeare's tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Instead, I take great comfort from that poignant inscription that we see on our war graves whenever the occupant couldn't be identified: "An Australian Soldier of the Great War, Known unto God." Because, friends, if our memories fail, if we feel that our lives and deaths ultimately matter little if at all, if we wonder in dark moments if any of it was or is worth it, then we have Jesus' promise in today's Gospel to comfort our hearts: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." Safe in Jesus' company, in his embrace, the dead, rather than forgotten

and out of mind, are very much on God's mind, and in God's heart for ever.

Jesus talks about his own death in today's Gospel not to extol sacrifice in general, which can be highly overrated, but to point beyond the mixed and compromised business of human sacrifice to God's own sacrificial heart, and the cross as a sign and seal of how seriously God loves us, bearing these burdens with us on the way to lifting them from us. Hence the resurrection, Jesus' power to take life up again as we hear in today's Gospel, which Jesus is commanded to reveal by his Father. So, God wants us to know that this is for real—that we needn't be left whistling in the dark, half-believing at best, when confronted by death and haunted by the prospect of forgetting.

So, friends, let's acknowledge and join in the brave hopefulness of ANZAC Day, but let's do so with a fully Christian hope, looking to that day when the graves will be opened and the sea will give up its dead, and the promise of Easter will be proven true after all—the day when half-

believers and non-believers might just breathe a great sigh of relief. And in the meantime, our Christian calling is to live and work as if it *is* true, filling out Australia's ANZAC hopefulness with the concreteness of Easter hope.

The Lord be with you ...