

ANZAC 2015: 100 year Commemoration
First Church, Dunedin
26th April, 2015
Rev Dr Tony Martin

Isaiah 40:21-31; Peter 2:13-17

WE REMEMBER OUR FALLEN

Today we remember those who have lived and died in the service of our country. Our act of remembrance is particularly poignant this year because it commemorates 100 years since the fateful landing of our army on the shores at Gallipoli.

Several years ago I visited the battlefield of the Somme paying my respects at the New Zealand, British and Commonwealth memorials. I have also been privileged to visit Monte Casino in Italy and there recalled the valiant effort of the New Zealand, British, American, Indian, and Polish forces in that cataclysmic battle.

On both occasions what struck me was the serenity and beauty of the cemeteries. Thousands of white headstones on manicured green lawns.

A colleague of mine visiting his war dead was stopped by the gardener lovingly tending each plot who said, "I watch the cars go by, but no one stops anymore."

Well today, ladies and gentlemen, we have stopped. And we remember our fallen. In the quietness of this place, for these few fleeting minutes, in reverent silence, before God, we remember our fallen.

First Church is a sacred place and has a rich history in both peace and war. I look up and about and I see regimental colours and the memorial window... First Church is a place where people committed their ways to God before military deployment. And returning months or years later, in worship services like today, gave thanks for a safe return. Many, I am sure, also poured out their grief and anguish for those who never returned. And throughout the various wars and military operations prayers were offered, and sermons preached, on the tragedy of war and the longing for peace. Today, in this sacred place, we remember those days, and those who have gone before.

At Gallipoli, we remember the confusion of the landings, the terrifying exposure to enemy fire, the relief and victory that never came. And for those who survived Gallipoli an even sterner test awaited months later, the battle of the Somme and Passchendaele. The mere mention of these place names, 100 years later, still has the power to evoke strong emotions mixed with sorrow and respect. I would defy anybody to walk on the battlefields of the Somme and not be moved to the core of their being. Amidst the anguish and sorrow arises the simple question "why?" What caused humanity to collapse into such wholesale slaughter? Questions and feelings I have no doubt the Kiwi, the Digger, the Tommy asked as they slugged it out. Today we remember our fallen and the great challenges which confronted them.

Moving on, my mind also takes me through the years to El Alamein where it was said that all one needed to mention was that they were at El Alamein and fought with the mighty Eighth Army under Montgomery. Nothing else was required because such was the respect and admiration rightly attributed to our soldiers of that campaign.

You will have memories as well. The Battle for Crete in May 1941 was one of the most dramatic battles of the Second World War. Over 7500 New Zealanders, along with British, Australian and Greek troops, tried to fight off a huge German airborne attack; and they almost succeeded. There were 671 New Zealanders among the dead, and 2180 were taken as prisoners of war.

We remember the fateful days at Arnhem - where surrounded by thousands of dead British paratroopers is a New Zealand chaplain, James Irwin, a young Anglican priest from Christchurch, who joined Britain's elite airborne forces and died with them. It was estimated over a 9 day period 8000 died or were captured out of the 10,000 who parachuted into Arnhem.

Our memory must move from the European theatre to the Pacific. We remember the fall of Singapore and incarceration of 100,000 Allied troops by the Japanese. We recall their heroism and suffering which was beyond human telling.

We remember the Expeditionary Force fighting its way through the Pacific in those fearful days of World War Two. We remember the 17 New Zealand Coastwatchers beheaded in Kiribati in 1942. We remember those who died in Korea, Borneo, Vietnam. We also recall the many years of peacemaking and peacekeeping – Bosnia, East Timor, Afghanistan.

One could go on, but allow me to give a final vignette, the battle for Monte Casino. Several years ago the Royal New Zealand Air Force flew a good number of veterans, politicians, and media to St Benedict's monastery at Monte Casino in the Italian countryside. It was the 60th anniversary of that titanic battle. In fact, there were four battles and the New Zealand Division, under Freyburg, led the 3rd, and some say the most difficult battle.

The monastery at Monte Casino is a potent symbol on an isolated hilltop. For centuries it was a centre of Christian inspiration and expansion. Yet for many who endured the ferocious battles in its shadow it signified something quite different: it was a cauldron of war. Over a six-month period in excess of a quarter of a million men were killed or wounded. Because it was here the German Wehrmacht made its stand against the Allied advance on Rome in 1944.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, we remember our fallen. We remember their courage, their devotion to duty, and their sacrifice.

SECONDLY, WE REMEMBER OUR DUTY

Our second scripture reading today reminds Christian men and women of their responsibility to uphold civic duties.

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.....17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

Of course, Peter is assuming the authority he is exhorting us to respect, and indeed to submit, is acting justly for the good of the whole. I grant you it becomes a little more problematic for the Christian when the authorities are unjust.

For example, Reverend James Chisholm, who wrote the magnificent book - *Fifty Years Syne* - commemorating the life and growth of Otago, alludes to this difficulty. The pioneering Scottish colonists of this province fled the Disruption in Scotland of 1843 because of Church and State conflict. Chisholm recalls the stirring voice of Andrew Melville from an earlier age who took a strong stand against the State when he addressed the King saying,

"Sir, I must tell you there are two Kings and two Kingdoms in Scotland. There is King James, the head of the Commonwealth, and there is Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, whose subject James the VI is, and in whose Kingdom he is not a King, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member. We will yield you your place, and give you all due obedience, but again I say, you are not the head of the Church" (p26).

There are times when Church and State are on a collision course and the Bible never exhorts us to submit and obey in every circumstance.

And of course, irrespective of one's spiritual allegiance, public debate on matters of defence and foreign policy is fundamental to a healthy democracy. In this light it is so heartening to see the strong public debate on the government's recent decision to deploy troops to Northern Iraq. It is not soldiers, sailors and airmen who go to war but it is the nation; our military are the instruments of the political decision made by the government. And the church and Christian people have a vital and rightful place in any national debate on war and peace.

And it is because of this type of public discourse I believe Scripture's imperative to submit, support and honour those who govern the nation will be well received.

Now, I know and accept that some will view things differently. But I believe at the personal level,

the strong command of Christ to forgive our enemy and do good to those who hate us, has to be balanced at the corporate level, by the State's responsibility to uphold justice, if need be by the use of force.

Service in the military is, therefore, an important and honourable profession. Someone has written:

It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press.

It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech.

It is the soldier, not the student activist, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.

It is the soldier, not the lawyer, who has given us the right for a fair trial.

It is the soldier who salutes the flag, who serves under the flag,
and whose coffin is draped by the flag.

The soldier who permits the protester even to burn the flag.

As we commemorate ANZAC Day we also remember our duty: to support and honour good government, to engage in public debate on vital issues, to show devotion to duty, courage and sacrifice, which will include for some the profession of arms.

AND FINALLY, TODAY WE REMEMBER GOD

Look about you. Do you marvel at the beauty of creation, noted particularly in the change of seasons? Or in Otago's clear still night, look upward to the extraordinary display of planets, stars and galaxies. Our eyes must now lift from our fallen, and ourselves, to God the Creator who is eternal and almighty.

1 Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

25 "To whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens.

God is not only transcendent and totally other, but he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and is truly present today in the Holy Spirit.

If you want to see the face of God look into the face of Christ. If you desire to know his presence, learn about the Holy Spirit.

So God is here, he is with us now. A young soldier wrote:

Look God I have never spoken to you.

But now – I want to say, "How do you do."

You see, God they told me you didn't exist,

And like a fool – I believed all of this.

Last night from a shell hole I saw your sky,

I figured right then they had told me a lie.

Had I taken time to see things you had made,

I'd known they weren't calling a spade a spade.

I wonder God if you'd shake my hand.

Somehow I feel you would understand.

Funny – I had to come to this hellish place,

Before I had time to see your face.

Well I guess there isn't much more to say.

But I am sure glad God I met you today.

I guess the zero hour will soon be here.

But I am not afraid since I know you are here.

The signal! Well God, I'll have to go.

I like you lots this I want you to know.

Look, now – this will be a horrible fight,
Who knows – I may come to your house tonight.
Though I wasn't friendly with you before,
I wonder, God, if you would wait at your door?
Look, I am crying, me – shedding tears,
I wish I had known you these many years.
Well, I will have to go now, God, goodbye.
Strange – since I met you – I'm not afraid to die.

This poem was found on the body of a dead soldier in Italy during the Second World War. Nations rise and fall. Tyrants come and go. But it is the my absolute conviction that if we live by God's law, are ruled by his love, and trust him for our very lives, then he will come from eternity into time. From the realms of glory, even to the agony of the battlefield.

Our lives, our nation, and our civilisation will be touched by Him. He will dwell with us. Arguably one of New Zealand's greatest military commanders was Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park who took command of No. 11 Group RAF, and was responsible for the fighter defence of London and the southeast of England during the Battle of Britain. You will recall a magnificent statue of him was unveiled in London several years ago.

And it was at a Battle of Britain Remembrance Service in St Paul's Cathedral in London that I heard this passage from Isaiah. Clearly it had been an inspiration to a former generation.

28 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

29 He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

31 but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

CONCLUSION

To conclude. Today we remember the courage, devotion to duty and sacrifice of our fallen. Secondly, we remember our duty to uphold justice and support the nation state. Finally, I exhort you to look above and beyond, to the eternal, and remember God. **AMEN.**