

MONDAY - 22nd April 2013

5.30pm ANZAC Commemoration Service for Members of the Newcastle Club in the St Michael Chapel (Warriors' Chapel) at Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle Readings: Psalm 90; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

It's fitting that this service is held each year in this Chapel, which is a memorial to those who lost their lives in the First World War. The Chapel has been said to represent "a sacrament of praise and thanksgiving, a selfless eucharist in stone and marble, commemorating the hosts of the young slain who, in the Great War, went out to die for something that they loved."

In my twenties I used to attend the ANZAC services at Knox Grammar School in Sydney where my mother was a music teacher and my two younger brothers attended. I was struck by the blend of military and religious symbolism. As in any battle where young people lose their lives (as at Gallipoli), families and friends and the nation at large look to make sense of the seemingly senseless, to find meaning where all meaning seems lost.

The purpose of any commemoration – like Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, funeral services – is, among other things, their role in helping to make sense of the event or war or death. People of an older generation frequently looked to the church and the Christian tradition to seek to come to terms with Gallipoli, indeed of the Great War in general.

In the tradition and history of Israel and the church, suffering, exile, bondage and captivity give way to hope and a new beginning. Slavery in Egypt gives way to the exodus; the Babylonian exile gives way to a return to the land; crucifixion gives way to resurrection.

These five central windows above the altar of the St Michael Chapel speak to us of the move from darkness towards light, and of death leading to life. St George, Patron Saint of England, whose feast day happens to be tomorrow, 22 April, is depicted slaying the dragon. Opposite, on the south side is St Michael the archangel defeating Satan. Then there's the prophet Micah foretelling the time when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Then there's St John the Evangelist, the beloved disciple of Jesus, who proclaimed the gospel of love. In the centre is Christ as both King and Good Shepherd, with the words underneath, "All nations shall bow before him."

Other furnishings, architecture and stained glass of the Chapel tell this story of the battle between light and darkness, the forces of life and death. Death gives way to life. At Gallipoli and indeed any other battle, we see these themes reflected in the young men who suffered and died in a lost battle, yet their sacrifice has won our freedom and been life-giving in other ways. More broadly, the sufferings and deaths of soldiers are part of the story that shapes the life of our nation at large.

Jesuit priest Andrew Hamilton says, “Ultimately, Anzac Day can be described as sacred only because all human beings are sacred. Each human being is precious in God’s sight. So, the life and the fate of each soldier who died at Gallipoli matter. The nobility and generosity shown by soldiers under such extreme pressure also matter. The grief of those who loved them and awaited their return matters. So does the common life of communities stripped of their young men and, with them, of their possibilities. In Christian symbolism, the poignancy and preciousness of each human life are crystallised in the death of Jesus Christ for all human beings. That grounds the sacredness of everything that touches humanity, of all ordinary human events.”

We remember not as an act of holding onto grudges or keeping the fires of animosity stoked. We remember to pay our respects certainly, but also to be reminded that this move from darkness towards light, from death to life is ongoing in every generation, and that this involves struggle.

Our reading from the first letter to the Corinthians describes the way God through the death of Christ has worked to bring life out of death. A prayer in *APBA* captures the spirit of this very clearly: “Make us a people zealous for peace, and hasten the day when nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any more. This we pray in the name of the one who gave his life for the sake of the world: Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.”