

Easter 4C – Anzac Day – 25 April 2010

Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30

In 1915, the date of Easter Day was the 4th of April – the same as it was this year. For those young soldiers from the young nations of New Zealand and Australia, celebrating Easter as they journeyed towards Constantinople must have been a somewhat strange yet exciting experience – a great adventure into the unknown – during those still early days of the Great War to end all wars. Three weeks later, sailing past the Greek islands, they could have had no idea of what was going to happen as suddenly they were sent ashore in the early hours of St Mark's Day, Sunday 25th April, half-way up the Gallipoli Peninsula.

It took about a week before news of that terrible day reached Australasian shores and immediately commemorations were hastily arranged. By 1916 the day was officially designated as ANZAC Day. Over the years, history, legend and countless interpretations have combined to create new understandings of meaning and identity.

This process has many parallels with the Easter story itself. Many of the symbols and rituals associated with ANZAC Day commemorations have a strongly Eastertide nature: the dawn service, the light in the darkness, the strange sense of victory out of defeat.

Each year in the Church's calendar, this fourth Sunday of Easter has the theme of the Good Shepherd. We read through the various parts of the tenth chapter of the Gospel according to St John.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is all too often watered down into that of a pleasant verdant pastoral scene like that of an 18th Century English landscape painting.

Shepherding in the rocky desert landscape of first century Palestine was far from such an idyllic image. The Scriptural image of the shepherd is more that of a warrior in a harsh landscape who will do anything to save his or her precious flock against predators of whatever variety, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures the image of the shepherd is used both as an image for kingship and for God. No doubt the most well known use of the shepherd image is in Psalm 23; no doubt also, a psalm which was recited endlessly on that first ANZAC morning.

For the early Christians, too, the image of the shepherd was a powerful symbol. The earliest artistic images of Christ are of the Good Shepherd – an image which survives in mosaic and stone from the second and third centuries and which is particularly found in the catacombs on Christian tombs. It is the identification of Christ as God who is with us, even in the valley of the shadow of death.

As Bishop John Robinson once put it: Christ died, not so that I don't have to, but so that I can.

Our readings today from the Acts of the Apostles and from the Book of Revelation, also speak to us of the early Church's attempts to come to grips with death and resurrection in the light of Easter Day.

The story of the raising of Dorcas by St Peter has echoes not only of Jesus and Lazarus but also of the raising of Jairus's daughter.

In Revelation, the churches of Asia Minor are struggling with what it means to suffer persecution for their faith. St John's visions – strongly grounded in the visions of the prophet Daniel – are a poetic imagining of victory through defeat in troubled times. It is an appropriate coincidence for ANZAC Day that Asia Minor is the same region as modern Turkey.

As Fr Stephen reminded us last week, the work of unpacking Easter goes on and on and on. For that matter, so does the work of understanding the Incarnation, as does the work of understanding what it means to be fully human, what it means to love, to forgive, to be loved and forgiven, and also what it means to fail.

Sometimes, the work of understanding, the work of finding meaning, the work of reconciliation and new life, is helped along from what we may regard to be the most unexpected of sources:

Kemal Atatürk, the founding president of the Turkish Republic, wrote in response to Gallipoli:

Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives...

you are now lying in the soil of a friendly country.

Therefore rest in peace.

There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us

where they lie side by side here in this country of ours.

You the mothers who sent their sons from far away countries wipe away your tears.

Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace.

After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.

Lest we forget.

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