

ANZAC Day and the Lectionary

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What happens as ANZAC Day, 25 April, occurs at a time in the Church's lectionary when the lessons speak of the sacrifice of Christ? Should such a juxtaposition be avoided because it confuses value systems which are potentially in conflict? In this paper I want to explore some of the issues and make some suggestions.

Many see such a conjunction of the secular and sacred calendar as unfortunate and confusing. What is the problem? Probably the most serious concern is that the lectionary might be seen as reinforcing the values of ANZAC Day. This is serious when ANZAC Day is understood as glorifying war. The ANZAC spirit for some also means the excuse to have a 'booze up with the boys', perhaps even an occasion to regress to levels of immature male behaviour which were once the response to the stress of loneliness and fear. Where the Returned Services League has become known as a purveyor of reactionary right wing politics, it would appear to turn reality on its head to have the sacrifice of Christ serve as its patron. Better to keep the two quite separate! Why confuse the sentimentalities of war heroes with the self giving compassion of Christ who, forgiving enemies, died that wars may cease?

'For God, for king, and for country' - such was the spirit of the soldiers. History has shown us the ambiguities of heroic causes. Why fight for a king or a queen in an age when monarchies have at most a symbolic value and most in our nation will favour a republic? The matter becomes even more complex when the war is no longer sensed as heroic, like the disaster in Vietnam. There are many Vietnam veterans left hanging and finding little meaning in their involvement.

The danger, however, of forcing a separation is that we fail to recognise significant common ground. Gallipoli has become a myth, the subject of film, the focus of annual rituals, a significant story for many more than those who trace some historical connection to it, having lost a relative on its shores. As a myth based on events in history it stands on common ground with Christianity. As with the Christian myth it is capable of a range of interpretations and applications. It may even be too soon to analyse how and why it works. In the events at ANZAC cove people return to a moment of defeat, of being caught out by better intelligence, of struggling against impossible odds, of solidarity in the face of hopelessness. It was tragically naive and probably poorly conceived as a strategy. Yet it has become the arena of remembrance that is capable of evoking a profound sense of community. This is what it means to be together: to stick together in such adversity. These were the heroes, the brave, the ignorant, the tragic, the sheep going to slaughter.

This is the myth which informs the ceremonies of ANZAC Day. 'We shall remember them' is a confession of solidarity. It is a vehicle for some of remembered grief, perhaps first hand in the horrors of lists of the missing, perhaps as a family memory kept alive by younger generations. Not all old souls are marching to the pub. Some will be there in the pub as a means of denial or playing it away; some will know moments of the naked fear they once felt and down a glass in a kind of assertive gesture: at least these my comrades understand! Our community has many, many people whose wounds of war have not healed and for whom the ambiguity of the cause has made coming to terms with it all impossible. There is pain in the community, the kind of pain that needs story telling and ritual, because it cannot be reduced to reason.

I can remember that one of our church youth club activities was to get up for the dawn service. It was like church and yet was different. Like church, its impact was less on our thinking than on our feeling and then somewhat vaguely, like a good liturgy. 'O God our help in ages past' or 'Eternal Father strong to save' meant something although they meant little. It was not the theology; it was more just the cry, the naive and child-like cry to God.

So what about the lectionary and ANZAC Day? What about the death of Christ and the ambiguous sacrifice of the soldiers? There is obviously a link at the level of compassion. It is Christ's compassion that helps us hear the pain expressed in the Gallipoli myth. For that compassion he died. There is a sense in which Christians also assume a profound solidarity at the point of human frailty and vulnerability. These are common values. But of course Christ's death is hardly to be compared with those tragedies of war. One might be a hating aggression against a perceived enemy, a naive analysis of good and bad, a blind

submission to authorities; the other, the violation of one who refused hatred and lived and died love.

One might go considerably further to point out the very different use of the word, 'sacrifice'. Christ was making atonement by his vicarious death; the soldiers died, victims of war, tragedies in the cause of protecting the country or the world against evil governments. Here caution is necessary. The motif of sacrifice and of vicarious suffering has its roots in the stories of the victims of evil regimes. Exiled suffering Israel, represented in Isaiah 53, the Maccabean martyrs and the Greek heroes who gave their lives to save their country provide the matrix of thought within which Christianity developed its sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death. The spirit of sacrifice, represented now in the ANZAC celebrations, provided the imagery which enabled Christians to speak of Christ as one who died for the people.

The juxtaposition of the ANZAC myth and the myth of Christ's crucifixion need not lead to confusion, any more than events of great pain may do, which may be totally different, but bear commonality. Even to speak of Christ's death as redemptive or transformative in its impact by comparison with the ANZAC debacle is to overlook the fact that events of pain nearly always carry with them a surplus of creativity which does something for people long after the event. That is certainly the case with Gallipoli, hence its emergence as myth.

Perhaps the solution is, therefore, not to divorce Christ's death from the Gallipoli myth, but to bring them into dialogue. Perhaps indeed, at the level of story, they may provide an arena in which Church and community may speak to one another. But this calls for creative and critical appropriation of myth. Controlled by the myth of Christ, the Gallipoli myth cannot for us become a celebration of war or of solidarity in adolescent behaviour. In its history, especially in the formative stages, the Church learned to baptise the myths of its age. Gallipoli is increasingly functioning as myth, especially as its survivors are now very few. It is losing its connection with historical reality only to develop a connection with a deeper, abiding reality. ANZAC Day is a moment in the year when the wider community allows itself to step over a threshold of spirituality and of pain. The lectionary, far from confusing the situation, may provide links which will enable us to be present where many people are in the period when ANZAC Day is celebrated.

It has been a tragedy that in many congregations, including progressive ones, the ANZAC myth receives silent treatment at a time when we need to be expanding our community's awareness of pain inclusively. Perhaps when this happens we may help our community face the other deep pains of our society, not least, the pain of the people of this land. Here, too, I believe this is most likely to occur through story, real myth which will create an arena for remembrance and for coming to terms with who we are. The passion of Christ becomes an invitation to solidarity with all who are violated or all who suffer and an opportunity for redemption and renewed life.

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