

Remembrance Centenary Homily

Isaiah 55:6-13; John 11:21-27

1. Introduction

We have gathered in this Cathedral today almost 100 years since the end of the First World War to remember and give thanks for the 920 volunteer soldiers from every corner of the then rural Diocese of Goulburn who lost their lives in that cataclysmic conflagration. We pause to remember the cost of the freedoms we enjoy today and to listen to God's comforting words about our ultimate future if we belong to Christ

2. Remember The Cost

The so called 'Great War' of 1914-1918 touched every facet of Australian life and most families. The appeal for soldiers to support Britain and oppose German militarism was couched in almost holy war language for God, King and country, and 457,000 men or half the eligible male population enlisted. But the eventual human cost was immense. The Australian casualty rate was the highest among the British empire forces. Some 61,700 Australians never returned home. They lie in the ground on Gallipoli and in Palestine, but two thirds of them are buried in a line from Villers-Bretonneux to Passchendaele. Of this human cost the historian Geoffrey Blainey has observed -

It was the loss of all those talented people who would have become prime ministers and premiers, judges, divines, engineers, teachers, doctors, poets, inventors and farmers, the mayors of towns and leaders of trade unions, and the fathers of another generation of Australians.

Of course the cost cannot just be counted in terms of those who died between 25th April 2015 and 11th November 2018. The number wounded was 155,000, or about half of those who served overseas. This figure does not include those who were gassed but did not seek treatment and spent the rest of their lives coughing and scratching. By the 1930s another 60,000 had died from wounds or illnesses caused by the war. At least one generation of women and children suffered terribly from all of this. Many soldiers returned broken and bitter or resorted to alcohol and violence in an era when post-traumatic stress disorder had not yet been diagnosed. The number of casualties is impossible to quantify.

Remember the cost. There are hints of it in the list of names in the back of our service booklet. Those who fell are listed without rank or honours because death is the great leveller. But it is sobering to read that small villages or communities may have seen the loss of several men from the same family. Spare a thought and weep for all the parents who lost a son and became the permanent carers for others severely injured by the experience. Spare a thought for the women (wives and sisters) who nursed the wounded, lung damaged and disabled. Spare a thought for the women who never re-married or the women who lost their childhood sweetheart and became the maiden aunts of my father's generation. The cost of the sacrifice is multi-dimensional and massive.

3. Listen To God

We gather today to remember the cost and thank God for the sacrifice of so many in the past, but we also gather to listen to what God has to say to us who still live in this broken world where war is an unfortunate but sometimes necessary reality. In a few minutes we will sing Psalm 23 which reminds us that God is with us through thick and thin to comfort and guide us until we reach our eternal home. In the two other readings set for this service we gain a helpful perspective on this future hope.

In the first place, the reading from Isaiah 55 assures us that God will work his purposes out for our ultimate good. Written to exiles who were wondering what their future might be, the prophet reminds them of the need to forsake their own ways and return to trusting

the merciful and pardoning love of God. He reminds them that God has a plan for their future and writes in powerful picture language –

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

In the context of these chapters in Isaiah God's purpose is the renewal of the universe; of all things. Just as his word once produced this beautiful world in which we now live, he will produce a new creation, a new world, which is free of the disfiguring effects of human sin. Elsewhere it is described as a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness. It will therefore be a place of peace. There will be no more hunger or thirst, no more fighting or war and no more illness or death. In fact, the Bible promises God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

In the second place, the reading from John's Gospel tells the familiar story of Jesus' encounter with Martha after the death of her brother Lazarus. When Jesus assures her that her brother will rise again she thinks he is just speaking about what will happen at the end of history. She is not ready for the outstanding claim which is now often read at Anglican funeral services –

Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

She instinctively realises his true identity as God's Son and Saviour and when she sees him raise her brother from death she begins to realise she is already in the resurrection age. The sacrificial death of Jesus followed by his own rising on the third day is the final guarantee of this reality. If we belong to him, physical death is the gateway to eternal life, to entrance into God's kingdom. Unlike the late Bertrand Russell we do not believe we will just rot and that will be the end of us. Nor do we believe we will be reincarnated to a new life in a different physical body if we are sufficiently good. We believe that like Jesus we will be raised to a new dimension of existence free of the constraints of time and space in the presence of God and all his people. Everyone who believes in Jesus though they die will live eternally

4. Conclusion

We remember with deep thankfulness the sacrifice of these men from our Diocese. We remember with thanks the cost borne by so many for the good of the world. We remember with thanks the good news of our ultimate future in Christ. But in the present we commit ourselves afresh to self-sacrificially oppose evil and seek peace in our communities and spheres of responsibility by serving the best interests of others in the way Jesus and these fallen soldiers did.

+ Trevor Edwards

13th October 2018