

Homily: Of bones and stones

Our church calendar and lectionary present us with such a rich variety this weekend: Anzac Day, the feast of St Mark the Evangelist, and the third Sunday of Easter.

In about Form Two (Year 10 these days), my classmates and I were introduced to the work of various war poets. I remember being equally horrified and fascinated by Roger McGough's 1967 poem, entitled 'On Picnics':

at the going down of the sun
and in the morning
I try to remember them
but their names are ordinary names
and their causes are thighbones
tugged excitedly from the soil
by French children
on picnics.

It is precisely because "their names are ordinary names" that we do "remember them" on Anzac Day. Their ordinary names are the names of relatives and friends – like my maternal grandfather, wounded (a fractured thighbone, oddly enough) by shrapnel from a high explosive shell at Passchendaele, and his brother, killed two years earlier at Gallipoli. We honour such as these, who suffered and sacrificed so much.

But what of "their causes"? Here we have to acknowledge things are much more difficult. Not all who went to war did so with honourable motives; and certainly the causes of the nation-states were often far from noble. The problem too is that war rarely accomplishes its aims; and the peace negotiated to end the conflict often carries within its terms the seeds of future conflicts. I'm reminded of the piece by Martin Luther King that Archbishop Philip quoted during last Sunday's livestreamed service, which I will quote only in part:¹

¹ The livestream service can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGIHt_19q5E&t=3300s
Archbishop Philip's sermon begins at 48:36.

A fuller version of King's statement can be accessed here: <https://www.wisdom-pills.com/what-it-means-to-love-ones-enemies-martin-luther-king-jr-on-the-importance-of-losing-enmity/>

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.

... The chain reaction of evil – hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars – must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation. ...
... love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power.”

As Archbishop Philip pointed out, the risen Lord Jesus commissioned his followers in the task of reconciliation (see John 20:19-23), a deeply pertinent message for Anzac Day.

Our lectionary supplies two options for the Gospel reading for Anzac Day: Mark 15:33-37; 16:1-2, 5-7; and John 11:17-27. Both of them speak of death and new life: in the case of the John passage, the death and resuscitation of Lazarus, and in the Mark passage, the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the setting of a civic Anzac Day service these readings would present a significant challenge, because the majority of people would have no knowledge of the context, the back-story, that makes sense of these passages and enables them speak powerfully into the particular occasion.

This weekend we also acknowledge the feast day of St Mark the Evangelist. Mark was a companion of Paul and Barnabas, and latterly of Peter; and he is regarded as the author of the second Gospel. His Gospel conveys a sense of immediacy and urgency, and this, together with its brevity, makes it an easy read.

The Gospel reading for the celebration of St Mark’s day is Mark 13:5-13. One of the disciples has expressed his admiration for the magnificent temple. Jesus tells him, “Not one stone here will be left on one another; every one will be thrown down.” The disciples go on to ask about when the destruction of the temple will take place. In reply Jesus warns that they should not get caught up with rumours and portents – perhaps these days we’d say “fake news”. Jesus encourages them not to be distracted or disheartened by such things,

but to endure to the end. For us, while the immediate context was discussion about the temple (which was in fact destroyed within a generation of Jesus' words), the encouragement to endure is as pertinent to Jesus' followers today.

I find myself wondering why those responsible for the lectionary chose this particular piece for the feast of St Mark. Certainly there is the obvious verse 10, "the gospel must first be preached to all nations". But I wonder if it is also because the task of the evangelist, following in Mark's footsteps, is in part to bring encouragement and perspective through the interpretation of the present times in the light of the good news of Jesus and God's purposes with humankind and all creation – for instance the Anzac Day challenge I mention above.

What are claimed to be St Mark's relics (his remains) were taken from Alexandria to Venice in 829 and placed in the original church of San Marco where they were venerated.

You may have noticed that I was careful to distinguish between the cases of Lazarus and Jesus above, "death and resuscitation" versus "death and resurrection". The distinction is vitally important. One way of thinking about the distinction is to recognise that it would be in theory possible to find relics of Lazarus, but it is not possible with Jesus. In resuscitation death is merely put off for a time: the underlying conditions that led to death remain, the frailty, decay and disease that eventually takes each living being remain, and death will certainly follow, whether in a long time or a short time, due to one cause or another. Resurrection may *look* the same as resuscitation, but it is completely different: in resurrection, death has no more power.

The point is, Jesus is walking around in his reanimated body *right now*. There was no body to be found in the tomb by Mary Magdalene and Peter and John; there was no human shell left crumpled on the mountaintop when Jesus disappeared from sight into the clouds at his ascension; there are no relics of his body.

Jesus' life was only separated from his body from the point of his death on Good Friday until his resurrection on that first Easter morning. After a Holy Saturday of waiting in death (and

for his disciples, waiting in distress and grief), on that first Easter morning his life was returned to Jesus' body ... and Jesus' life remains within his body even now. It is in many ways the same body: his face would still be recognizable to his disciples; the body still speaks with the voice that brought astonished joy to Mary Magdalene; the body's hands and feet and head and side still bear the wounds that he suffered on the cross; the body is tangible (touchable); it still eats fish. What existed of Jesus up until the point of death didn't suddenly become irrelevant or redundant, not at the moment he died, nor at the point at which he rose again.

But that first Easter morning was also a *new* beginning. Because that same body is now transformed. The risen Jesus could now appear in rooms although doors may be locked; he could disappear from one place and reappear in another at will; he could ascend to heaven, the realm of God the Father. This body is also transformed in that it is healed: it is no longer subject to effects of his brutal death. Most importantly, this transformed body is no longer subject to death *ever* – whether from injury or from disease or from old age or any other cause.

It was a new beginning. On that first Easter, Jesus started the life of the age to come.

We read in Luke 24 of the encounter two followers of Jesus had with the risen Jesus on the Emmaus road. These two can't fathom what has been going on: first their hopes have been dashed with the death of Jesus and the loss of all that he had represented for them; and then there comes a strange story that somehow he lives again. And the (at that stage) unrecognised Jesus says to these two:

“How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”

And we read on

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

It is not that Jesus goes through some elaborate proof-texting exercise, plucking verses out of our Old Testament that can be pressed into talking of the suffering of the Messiah and his rising from the dead and so on. Rather, what he does here on the Emmaus road is provide

the back-story, demonstrating that he is the fulfilment of the whole sweep of the scriptures, the entire story that begins in Creation and the image-bearing purpose for which humankind was designed but in which they had failed; a story that continues especially in Israel, a particular nation of people called out by God to pick up that image-bearing task, rescued from slavery and placed in a land promised to them. To Israel was given the Law so that they would know what sin was and so that sin's effects could be concentrated in them; to Israel was given first the tabernacle and subsequently the temple – meeting places between God and humankind – together with a system of religious acts that reflected the appropriate attitude required for such an extraordinary encounter; and so on. On the cross the fate of all of rebellious humankind was hanging on the rescue operation that God had launched in *Israel*, the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and had now focussed on the one perfect representative of that family.² As Jesus was pointing out as he walked with the two on the Emmaus road, his death and resurrection made no sense without understanding that the bones of that story were the story of God's covenant with Israel.

At the same time though, we need to remember that Jesus did not *resuscitate* Israel. By the time of Jesus, Israel had failed, it was oppressed by foreign powers, and its religious system had become diseased. In a sense it too was in a Holy Saturday period of death and grief.

But then, new life! In Jesus Israel was not *resuscitated* however; in Jesus God's covenant with Israel was *resurrected*, transformed. In the risen Jesus, God's particular people are now found in his Church, a people not just of one race and land but of many – the gospel has now come to all nations. Through the Spirit sent by the risen Jesus, the Law is now written in the minds and hearts of all who call him Lord. In the risen Jesus we now have the new temple, the perfect meeting place between God and humankind; and Jesus himself has performed all the ritual acts necessary to make that meeting safe.

And here we find that we too are included in this resurrected Israel and this transformed meeting place with God – as Saint Peter wrote:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to

² N T Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, pp.68, 87

be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ...

[You] are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10)

Being the Church at present is very strange, as we find ourselves unable to gather for worship in our buildings. But let us in this time remember first that the Church is a body formed of "*living stones*". As we look ahead we, the Church, must be transformed; not merely over and over again resuscitating what we have been before – for without healing and renewal it will simply go on to die – but receiving God's renewed *resurrection* life in a form appropriate for the times in which we live.

Led onwards by the transforming Spirit of God, we work towards the day when the transformation begun in Jesus is made complete in us and in all of creation. This is the ongoing work of the risen Jesus who met the astonished disciples on the road to Emmaus that first Easter day.

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