

21 April 2024

Acts 4:5-12  
1 John 3:16-24  
John 10:11-18

The Shrine of Remembrance, located in Kings Domain in Melbourne, was built as a memorial to the men and women of Victoria who served in World War I and is now a memorial to all Australians who have served in war. It is one of the largest war memorials in Australia.

The sanctuary of the Shrine contains a marble Stone of Remembrance, upon which is engraved the words "Greater love hath no man". Once a year, on the precise anniversary of the cessation of hostilities, at 11am on the 11th of November, a ray of sunlight shines through an opening in the roof to light up the word "Love" in the inscription.

The inscription "Greater love hath no man" comes of course from the Bible, from John 15:13. The full verse, often used on war memorials, is "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

As it happens, the Bible readings set down for today, the fourth Sunday after Easter, include the very same idea: from 1 John 3:16 we get

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

And from John 10:11

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Anzac services have grown larger in recent years, perhaps reflecting a longing for unity. In the Anzac story we may find ourselves united in our shared history; connected one to another across divisions of class, race, creed, gender, or generation.

But all of this also comes with ambiguity and paradox.

Not all who went to war did so with honourable motives; and neither have nations always gone to war in the pursuit of noble causes. Memorials may use the phrase “No greater love”, but it has to be acknowledged that not all who lost their lives did so out of love for anyone or anything.

We *grieve* over those we lost in war, while at the same time we *give thanks* for what was accomplished and for what we enjoy today – freedom, democratic government, relative peace.

We wish to *honour* those who fought and gave their lives in war, but we don’t want to *glorify* the warfare in which they took part.

Anzac Day itself reflects ambiguity as it originally commemorated, not the beginning of the First World War, nor its end, but Gallipoli, an error-ridden, futile battle, which made little difference to the outcome of the war as a whole.

Anzac parades are often led by Christian chaplains, and words of scripture are read. But we have to acknowledge that many who went to war, especially the First World War, came away from the brutality and futile slaughter finding that the war had also destroyed any vestige of faith.<sup>1</sup>

Anzac Day is a day of ambiguity and paradox.

Where is the clarity?

Well, I think it is important that we be honest about the ambiguity and paradox; that we hold these seemingly conflicting and mutually exclusive truths in tension with one another.

There is however no ambiguity in Peter’s words, recorded in Acts. He says Jesus is

“the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.”

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

But for many this cornerstone, this unambiguous claim, has become a stumbling block. The Christian claim that salvation is found in Jesus and no one else, the claim

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/faith-belief-and-superstition#sthash.AwWkg2qG.dpuf>

that Jesus is the only Way, the Truth and the Life, ... this claim is regarded by many as an exclusive claim that has no place in a modern society in which religious toleration is held as an important value.

The same claim is made, in effect, in John chapter 10. Jesus' claim to be the gate for the sheep and to be the good shepherd doesn't appear in isolation. It comes as he responds to the Pharisees who have taken issue with him over the healing of the man born blind. The question that dominates chapter 9 is that of Jesus' authority to heal.

Jesus responds with this picture of the shepherd with his sheep. This image is frequently used within the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to the king, the ideal shepherd, and his people, the flock.

And God adopts the shepherd metaphor for himself, to represent his own perfect kingly reign – as we find in Ezekiel 34 in particular.

So this is Jesus' extraordinary claim. He is at least claiming to be Israel's true, God-anointed, king, the one who will rule in a way that truly saves and provides for his people. And there is also the undercurrent, the hint, that this Good Shepherd may also be claiming to be God.

Yes, it is a bold and unique claim – that Jesus alone is Good Shepherd and Lord. But just because it is unique does not make it exclusive. In fact the claim carries with it a totally inclusive purpose. As Jesus says at John 10:16,

I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. All, all, are invited to come to acknowledge the shepherd's voice and authority.

And it is imperative that we remember that worldwide inclusive invitation.

We need to remember it, because it is the dreadful tendency of fallen humankind to slip into exclusivism of all kinds. We make fellow human beings into "others", somehow separate from us. We stereotype and demonise.

And this is no less apparent than in war-time. In an article that appeared in Christianity Today a few years ago, the author noted how in wartime we go on to enlist our religion on our side too – he writes:

The details may have varied from nation to nation, but once the shooting started in the summer of 1914, each of the major warring powers wound up embracing the language of holy war. This was more than a little ironic, given that World War I was effectively a civil war among Christians: with the exception of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, all of the leading warring nations shared a common religious ideology. Rather than wrestling with that unsettling irony, however, all sides rushed to condemn enemy nations as ungodly and to "proclaim fellow believers as de facto infidels."

Examples abound. Russians denounced Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm as the Antichrist. German writers equated Britain with the great whore of Babylon described in Revelation. English bishops informed their countrymen that they were God's "predestined instruments to save the Christian civilization of Europe."<sup>2</sup>

And so on.

And when we encounter people of other religious beliefs we need to remember too that the label 'Christianity' covers not just the Good Shepherd and the rest of what is recorded in the New Testament, but also covers two thousand years of faith and folly, wisdom and wickedness: we could think of the Inquisition, of witch-burnings, of political machinations such as the Constantinian settlement, the Crusades, the establishment of the Church of England, to list just a few obvious examples.

So we need appropriate humility to recognise that being on the side of right doesn't necessarily make us right; being followers of Christ doesn't automatically make us free from error and un-Christlike actions. We need this humility especially at this present time, when it is so easy to demonise others; when it is easy to forget that present conflicts are more complex than simply being of one religion against another;

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<sup>2</sup> McKenzie

when it is easy to overlook that fact that worldviews of materialism, consumerism and individualism can be every bit as imperialistic as any religious worldview. Our own cultural environment needs the goodness of the Shepherd just as much as any other culture does.

But we also need to remain bold, as Peter and John were bold – the unique claim remains. Abuse of the truth shouldn't impugn the truth itself. And the truth is that the resurrection was unique; that Jesus is Lord; that there is only one path to salvation.

*“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.”* The phrase has been appropriated in memorialising the fallen in war-time, but let us remember first, and above all, the one who first uttered these words in reference to himself – Jesus.

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

The sheep are facing danger; the shepherd will go to meet it, and, if necessary, he will take upon himself the fate that would otherwise befall the sheep. In Jesus' case, it was necessary, and he did.<sup>3</sup>

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.*

Our role is to be Jesus' flock, heeding his voice, moving into the closest possible relationship with him. But our role is also to be under-shepherds, continuing the Good Shepherd's work, continuing to seek the sheep of different folds, willing to risk all for the world's true Lord.

At 11am on the 11th of November, a ray of sunlight shines through an opening in the roof of the Shrine of Remembrance, falling on the phrase “Greater love hath no man”, picking out the one word, the key word, “Love”.

The entire New Testament speaks of a saving act of love which stands out from all others. No other name speaks of innocent life laid down for others, generating spontaneous love for the outsider and the needy. One of the reasons Christianity

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *John*, p.152.

spread in the Roman world was that nobody had ever looked after the sick and friendless with the self-sacrificial love that the Christians showed. On behalf of the true good shepherd of the sheep, they strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bound up the injured, brought back the strays and searched for the lost.

This name that is above all names speaks of love. This name speaks of love with skin on, then and now.<sup>4</sup>

### Sources

Adapted and abridged from a sermon first preached at Christ Church Whanganui, 26 April 2015. Web references below were viewed in April 2015 and may have changed since.

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- Wright, *John for Everyone*
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- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrine\\_of\\_Remembrance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrine_of_Remembrance)
- <http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/faith-belief-and-superstition#sthash.AwWkg2qG.dpuf>
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<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays, Year B*, p. 61.