

Second Sunday of Easter – 27th April 2014 – Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra

Theme: “Easter Redeeming ANZAC Day”

Reading: John 20:19-31 “Behind locked doors”

In the year AD325, the Council of Nicaea set the date of Easter as the Sunday following the Passover full moon, which is the first full moon on or after the northern hemisphere Spring Equinox. The Jewish Passover, of course, was the time of the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples.

This means that for we Western Christians using our current Gregorian calendar, the latest possible date for Easter Sunday is April 25, which last occurred in 1943, and will occur again in the year 2038, which may result in the loss of a public holiday. So Easter and ANZAC Day are related by this extraordinary confluence of the celestial mechanics.

Of course, Easter and ANZAC Day share not only an occasional clash of dates. They both commemorate an event of great human folly, of sacrifice and of suffering. For Australia, the cost for attempting to invade Turkey included around 25,000 casualties including over 8,000 killed. The total, including British, French, Indian, Turkish and others, was around 130,000 killed.

For almost 2,000 years the Easter ‘Holy Days’ have been the central religious event in the calendars of the western world, but the occasional clashes are timely for they signal a deeper reality. ANZAC Day is increasingly staking a claim to replace Easter as a major pseudo-religious holiday in 21st Century Australia.

For some, this claim is absurd. Easter celebrates the assurance of salvation, reconciliation with God and eternal life obtained through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is obviously and overtly religious. ANZAC day commemorates the sacrifice of Australian (and New Zealand) soldiers, sailors and airman in defending the freedom of Australia in war. It is not religious at all. Yet ANZAC day is not just another public holiday like Australia Day or the Queen’s Birthday. It has subtly taken on the character of a state religion in the Australian psyche.

The term ‘religion’ is usually defined in terms such as: ‘a cause, or principle, a system of beliefs held with ardour, devotion, conscientiousness and faith, a value held to be of supreme importance’.

ANZAC day has indeed been adopted in these terms, and not just by ex-servicemen. An institution that seemed to be quietly fading away in the 1960s has been resurrected on a rising wave of popular enthusiasm. When we used to attend the War Memorial dawn service in the early nineties with the Wamboin Scouts, there were a few hundred in attendance, many of them cadets bussed in from ADFA. Last Friday we had 4,000 at the Dawn Service, and tens of thousands at 10am, particularly when Royalty is present. The same is true at events right across Australia.

Our ANZAC Day **does** contain religious rituals,
like the laying of wreaths,
the minute’s silence,
the religious liturgy repeated by all
‘they shall not grow old as those that are left grow old...lest we forget’,
the religious last meal (the gunfire breakfast),
the haunting musical strains of the last post and the reveille,
the parades and marches with their bands, emblems and banners,
the symbolism of the new dawn as the sun rises on the many worshippers,
young and old, in the varied temples in towns across the land.

There is even the opportunity for increasing numbers of young Australians to take a religious pilgrimage like 'the Haj', by attending a Dawn Service at the birth place of the religion – the sacred ANZAC Cove itself. Next year, for the one-hundredth anniversary, we're having a ballot to determine the 8,000 Australians and 2,000 New Zealanders allowed to attend the ceremonies at Gallipoli. The management of this major tourist event each year has become a real challenge, as it takes on an increasingly festive nature, with impacts on the local environment and the hospitality infrastructure.

So how should we Christians respond to the continuing rise of the ANZAC pseudo religion? I think we have three clear alternatives – to

Reject ANZAC Day,
Receive ANZAC Day, or
Redeem ANZAC Day.

Firstly, we can reject engagement in ANZAC day:

For many the only faithful, but immensely unpopular, option is to reject ANZAC day outright. These Christians see in the continuing appeal of the ANZAC pseudo-religion a sad by-product of the decline of Christian religion in Australia. True Christianity they argue, tolerates no rivals, no pagan idols. The ANZAC religion does just that, they argue, and so it deserves to be rejected outright. To fail in one's public rejection of it, or even worse to embrace it, confuses the true gospel of Grace.

Some see church engagement in the whole ANZAC tradition as at best an annoying distraction and at worst a pollution of the gospel with pagan nationalistic ritualism, or a sinful glorification of war at the expense of the cause of social justice and pacifism. They say that only a courageous stand against the dominant culture preserves the purity of the Christian faith against the storm of prevailing secularism.

Secondly we can receive the ANZAC pseudo-religion and welcome it wholeheartedly as a celebration of sacrifice and human virtue in the face of adversity. This is especially so as Christianity continues to have a prominent place in the ANZAC commemorations, a fact visibly present each year in the leading role of military padres in many ANZAC services and the reading of scripture, hymns and prayer at most events. How could anything be wrong with this? Therefore, we should give ourselves unreservedly in our support of it. This is the approach taken by most Christians, lay and ordained, within the Armed Forces.

But this, too can be seen as inadequate. It can be said that the religious equivalent of multi-culturalism (syncretism) holds that these soldiers (and by implication all of us) are saved by our good and selfless deeds on behalf of others. The danger of merging our Christian faith with the civic religion of ANZAC day is a very real one, perhaps especially so for military Christians who are daily immersed in the culture and sometimes unthinkingly embrace both the baby and the bathwater.

Thirdly, we can redeem ANZAC Day. There are many laudable elements in the religion of ANZAC. The values of self-sacrifice, community, mateship and redemptive suffering are very valid, and they resonate deeply with many Aussies. There is the appropriate sense of thankfulness for the sacrifice of others when we cheer them as they march and remember those who did not come back and the many others who still carry the scars of war.

I like and respect ANZAC Day and, while I believe we need to be wary of unreservedly embracing it, I also think we should not reject it. The example of the Apostle Paul in Athens is instructive. Paul could easily have railed against the pagan religious beliefs he saw all around him in Athens. Instead, in his "Sermon from Mars Hill", as we read in Acts 17:22, he deliberately

connected with the prevailing religious view, without compromise, in order to introduce his listeners to the one and only God. How could we follow this example with the Anzac pseudo-religion?

One way that we can redeem ANZAC Day is to remember that the ANZAC tradition values sacrifice. It upholds the selfless acts of soldiers, which often cost them their very lives on the battlefield. This is no mythology, put a powerful historical truth.

These acts of human courage and sacrifice were not demonstrations of sinless purity, but they should be applauded, for they are a reflection of the far greater sacrifice that was made for us by Jesus. It is important to note that by far the most common reading in ANZAC services is John 15:13 'Greater love has no one than this, than he lays down his life for his friends' a verse which graces countless ANZAC graves and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Australian War Memorial. To explain how the sacrifice of the ANZACS is like that of Jesus is true and it makes sense to our non-Christian hearers.

Another way that we can redeem ANZAC Day lies in the beginning of the ANZAC religion at Gallipoli in 1915. The fact that Australians remember the Gallipoli campaign as their great national day must be odd to people of other nations. The Americans have their Independence Day, the French have Bastille, the British their Waterloo and Trafalgar, but the Australian national day centres on an ignominious defeat in a side show theatre of the Great War. Whether we blame Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty for this is beside the point.

There is much in the ANZAC religion that is good and noble. Like missionaries anywhere it is our task as Christians to applaud that truth, but show at the same time its limitations, and its far greater realisation in the redemptive story of God culminating in the death of his Son for our sins. To the extent that we do this, we are 'missional' - We use the dominant culture without capitulating to it.

ANZAC Day is not wholly evil, nor is it wholly good, just like culture in general. It is up to us to reject the evil, receive the good and redeem the whole. Today's readings from John and from 1 Peter engage with this - about how we can stand up and engaging with social justice and cultural issues ...

On Easter Day the disciples were hiding behind locked doors because they were afraid. Mary Magdelene had told them that Jesus was alive, but still they hid. This small, frightened community - the beginning of a movement that would transform human history. And here they were - hiding behind locked doors.

Perhaps we know how the disciples felt? Cowering behind locked doors, hiding from things that frighten us:

- fear or doubt;
- illness or addiction;
- perceptions of inadequacy in our life with partners, family and friends;
- self righteousness, self-deprecation or self obsession;
- pain we've experienced or pain we've caused or pain that we anticipate;
- relationships that are breaking or relationships that are already broken.

All of these things lock us in and make us hide behind closed doors. Surely we have some insight into how the disciples of Jesus felt after the events of Good Friday. And yet Mary said that Jesus is raised. Unbelievable!

The disciples weren't left by themselves to deal with their fear and uncertainty. Jesus came to them through their locked doors and said -"Peace be with you"- the words which continues to be part of our services to this day.

Thomas wasn't left by himself to deal with his doubt. Jesus came to him and said – "Touch the wounds that led to my death and believe that I am alive."

Jesus didn't wait for the disciples to have faith; he didn't wait for them to do anything. He came to them through their locked doors and just loved them.

This is the meaning of resurrection. In the midst of fear and doubt, in the midst of locked doors, the God who raised Jesus from the dead also breaks into our lives.

But something had changed. Jesus didn't just come to his disciples once and then disappear forever. When Jesus gave the Spirit to his disciples he also gave them the instruction booklet ... "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus made it clear to his disciples that the Spirit of God is a Spirit of love and service. It took a while for the disciples to realise this. Only when they began to speak about Jesus and act out his commands to love and serve did they realise the true significance of the gift they've been given. Only when they stepped out from behind their locked doors did they discover that Jesus was with them.

This small and frightened community became the beginning of a movement that transformed human history. We are a part of this same movement, in which people are transformed by their conviction that Jesus is alive. Jesus has walked through our locked doors, given us his Spirit, and sent us out to open the doors that imprison others.

Thanks be to God that the empty tomb is not the end of Easter. Thanks be to God that the empty tomb is just the beginning. The good news of Easter is that there is nowhere that God's power cannot reach – even through locked doors.

So we can individually decide whether to reject, receive or redeem ANZAC commemorations. And ANZAC **Day** is over, but the spirit of ANZAC continues. And Easter **Day** is over, but Easter is just beginning - every day can be new life for all of us.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.
Amen!

Robert James
27 April 2014