

**Address to the Anzac Day Chapel Service, 23 April 2016, the Chapel of Trinity College and Janet Clarke Hall, The University of Melbourne**

As Scripture reminds us, there is a time – for all of us – to live, and a time to die. Yet some deaths are harder to understand than others. A good life, well lived into old age, can allow for sadness but also for celebration among those who gather to remember. On the other hand, a good life – not properly realized, or fulfilled, and cut short by violent death - is a puzzle. Such a death provokes contemplation about the deeper currents at work in the world. Such a death provokes sadness that can shape the rest of our lives. And surely some of the saddest funerals of all are the ones in which parents have to bury their own children.

It has been more than a century since Australians, who had hitherto gloried in the possibilities of war, faced up to the real consequences of war. Consequences felt by our soldiers and sailors, for those who encouraged them to serve, for our families, for our nation. And tomorrow's dawn service will mark a century on since a few hundred recently returned servicemen gathered in Melbourne near Princes Bridge, for a short march ending with a church service at St Paul's Cathedral. They did so to mark the day on which Australians and New Zealanders had landed, one year earlier, on the beaches of Turkey at a place called Channakale by the Turks, and Gallipoli by the Empire forces.

In the larger scheme of things, the Gallipoli landings were strategically significant, poorly planned and executed, and they ended in military failure. Australians, and New Zealanders were buried alongside French and British soldiers, and the African and Indian soldiers of the French and British Empires.

The Turks, backed by small numbers of German advisers and specialists, took enormous casualties but gained a major victory in repelling the naval and land forces of these larger Empires. Men from all the major combatant nations died in appalling numbers. Sadly, these numbers pail in comparison to other military and civilian blood baths. This was a war that combined deadly military technology with acts of national and racial savagery on a hitherto unparalleled scale.

For Australia, and for New Zealand, in military terms the Anzac campaign determined nothing. Our troops were redeployed to the Western Front where they would suffer much greater casualties. In 1918, they would play an important role in the eventual defeat of Germany as the war finally came to its end.

The first Anzac Day was many things, but why do we remember it? Why keep coming back to it? What exactly are we commemorating on Anzac Day? On that first, 1916 Anzac Day commemoration, what then of the role of the priest, or preacher, or the College Principal? It strikes me that many Australians still yearn for sacrament even as our churches become, for most, a foreign place. In our

national calendar Anzac Day has become the most important event in the secular sacramental, a ritual still infused with religious tradition, and a space in which many young Australians search for deeper meaning. Of course in 1916, unlike today, virtually all Australians were practicing Christians. Jesus' injunction to the women and men of Australia in 1914 – taking the King James translation of the day - that 'Greater Love hath no man than this, that a man may lay down his life for his friends' provided a way for men, and women in our community to imagine the call to military service as a higher duty, and of death or dismemberment as a purposeful sacrifice. For the priest or the preacher, finding words and ritual to make sense of the death and dismemberment, words and ritual that helped families to mourn, and to honour their own among the dead, was perhaps the most demanding role they would face in their ministry over many years from Anzac Day 1915. It was one consequence of this war, not just over long years of warfare, but thereafter in an Australia in which the young dead, whose lives were cut short in lawfully-sanctioned violence, occupied the thoughts of the living for generations to come.

What then, on that first, 1916 Anzac Day commemoration, of the civilian - who never saw war, but whose life was forever changed by it? Let me speak here of just one Australian mother, no more, nor less typical than tens of thousands of others. Mrs Jones was told that her son, who died at Gallipoli, had 'died for his country'. Perhaps for her, with no body to bury, Anzac Day provided a space in which to try

and make sense of her own memories, as she confronted a void that would hereafter occupy the that space her boy would have filled in his living, but was now a space filled with his death. Like other mothers, fathers, younger brothers, olders sisters, and family friends, in families around Australia, death had replaced life in a far away place, and in conditions that were almost impossible to comprehend. Anzac Day might have helped Mrs Jones to make sense of Gallipoli, even as she grappled with the questions she asked of the Red Cross:

‘I would like to know how long he lived... did he suffer much, and was he conscious, did he ask for his parents in any way and did he send any message? I would like to know where he is buried and ... how long he was in the firing line before he was wounded. This is a dreadful war... makes so many sad homes and taking away so many’.

Anzac Day may never have filled the void, but one sees in its early, simple ritual a nation struggling to find a way to make sense of its loss. One sees a contrast with this strange, modern Australia we live in, an Australia where reality becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from artifice, an Australia where politicians fuel a commemoration industry centred on patriotic gesture, that one might question some aspects of Anzac Day commemoration. It could never have been so a hundred years ago in 1916. As the editor of the *Age* newspaper put it back then, ‘The price paid for landing at Gallipoli ... [is] in the casualty lists... we see in the streets/ young soldiers from Gallipoli [with] scarred faces, sightless eyes, maimed bodies... The solemn service... marked the national sorrow for the loss of those

who died at Anzac, the national sympathy for the families of the fallen, rather than the national pride at the greatness of the achievement.’

What then of Australia and New Zealand’s servicemen and servicewomen, whose sacred memory we gather to honour today? In 1915, young men from the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps rowed towards the beaches at Gallipoli hoping desperately to match their personal actions with our national, and our shared Empire aspirations – to be brave, to fight well, and to die with courage.

In the course of the Gallipoli campaign, they met the realities of modern, industrial warfare – and it was soldier who had to try and stay sane, and to stay alive, as he reconciled the gap between schoolboy patriotism and Turkish sniper fire. The immediate, oftentimes horrifying, and oftentimes terrifying realities of battle drew our soldiers into a space which some could never imagine surviving. The realities of war promoted an extraordinary trust and dependence upon others – an experience of ‘mateship’, if you like – that is beyond anything that those of us who have not shared in that experience might readily understand. Soldiers find it easy to forgive the sins of others who have fought alongside them, risked their lives, and sometimes died to save them. My friend and colleague Chris Johnston, one among a current generation of Australian soldiers who have seen the face of war, remembers soldiers among ‘the fallen’ - ‘including’, he says, ‘some of my friends’ – and he remembers them ‘as they were - brave, violent, frightened, flawed.’ From

1916, Anzac Day provided a space, and a day, for soldiers to come together, during and then after a war that set them apart, in one crucial aspect, from all but each other.

So much, then, of the preacher, the civilian, the soldier. Today in this Chapel, the day before Anzac Day, we gather in part to honour the men and women who have offered up their lives in the service of our two nations, Australia and New Zealand, whatever the rights and wrongs of war. We remember them particularly among those nations who fought at Gallipoli, brought together, as we were, in our joint service to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corp. It is a bond that has endured ever since, through the Second World War and the Korean conflict, from Vietnam including at Long Tan, from Timor Leste through to Afghanistan.

We remember our New Zealand compatriots, who like us have lost so many fine young men and women, in war. We remember all Australians who have served, and all who have suffered through war.

Among the Anzacs, we remember that many of them did not come back. Others were broken physically, or psychologically, by the horror and strain of modern warfare. Of those many who returned, most got on with their lives as they tried to put war behind them. In doing so, mostly they had to put what they had experienced in battle into a private space – never speaking of their worst memories with their wives, or their children, or anyone else. They paid a high price for a national aspiration centred upon war. They served their nations, Australia and

New Zealand, with extraordinary valour. We should never forget their sacrifice.

We **will** remember them.