

Easter 3, Anzac Weekend, 26 April 2020

“SOLDIERING ON IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE”

(Acts 2:36-41; Psalm 116:1-4,11-18; 1 Peter 1:13-25; Matthew 28:8-15)

Over the last few weeks Sarah and I have been reading our travel diary and looking at photos from our visit to France 10 years ago, when we visited the Normandy landing beaches, and spent some days exploring sites in the Western Front from World War I. We went to the Australian War Memorial and the village of Villers-Bretonneux with its touching call to “never forget Australia”. We stopped at many many War Cemeteries, mainly of the allied forces, but also a substantial German cemetery – a reminder that soldiers on both sides gave their lives because that was the demand of their countries’ leaders, the ones who made the decisions to be involved in the conflict. The year before our visit to France, Sarah and I had the opportunity to visit Gallipoli, which of course is so significant on this Anzac weekend. It was a quiet morning when we were there, and it seemed right to be quiet and to reflect on the terrible cost of war.

War is a terrible thing. The cost in human lives is appalling, and row after row of graves in the places we visited was a stark reminder of that cost. And of course, so many servicemen and servicewomen who return from war having survived the conflict, come back with wounds both visible and invisible, wounds which take a real toll of the lives not only of those who fought, but of their loved ones.

Anzac Day is not an opportunity to glorify war, but to give thanks for those who made great sacrifices in the service of their country and people, to remind ourselves how blessed we are to live in a democratic and prosperous country so far from the theatres of war, to pray for those who serve in our armed forces both in Australia and in places of danger overseas, and to pray for peace and justice in our world, which still has so many places of violence and conflict. I am not a pacifist: sadly I believe that there are times in this world when the results of not going to war may be even worse than the results of going to war. We need to pray for our leaders, for great wisdom and care when the possibility of involvement in war is being considered.

War is a significant theme in the scriptures. In the Old Testament, God’s people often found themselves involved in war: sometimes at God’s call, sometimes in desperate defence against powerful enemies. In New

Testament times, the Roman Empire wielded great power, and it was a relatively peaceful period, except for any who resisted the might of Rome.

And yet the theme of war is often to be found in the New Testament scriptures: the idea of Christians as being involved in a spiritual war. This theme is picked up by many famous hymns: for instance, “Onward Christian soldiers”, “Fight the good fight”, “Soldiers of Christ, arise”, and “Stand up, stand up for Jesus, as soldiers of the cross”. In recent decades some church leaders have wanted to omit such militaristic hymns from our hymn books. Yes, I know that they can be misunderstood, and they can be misused to suggest that particular military conflicts are specifically in Christ’s name. But most people will see that this is not what the hymns are about. There **is** a spiritual war still going on, as the spiritual forces of evil seek to resist the purposes of God. But the righteous ruler of all must in the end put down the forces of evil. And as we live in this world with its mixture of good and evil, we are caught up in this spiritual war: hence Paul in his letters uses the image of a soldier to describe the challenges of living as a faithful follower of Christ.

And even though Peter doesn’t use the term in this morning’s reading from 1 Peter, we can see how relevant the image of the soldier is to much of what he writes about. Right at the beginning of our reading, he calls his readers – in other words he calls **us** – to “**prepare our minds for action**”. The literal translation is “gird up the loins of your mind”. It is firstly a picture of the person who is wearing the conventional long robe; but the robe is going to get in the way of the activity or work that needs to be done, so he hitches it up over a belt or girdle. Then he can get on with the task. In the case of the soldier, it would be “Get suitably dressed and ready for action”.

What Peter is saying is that living as a Christian isn’t something to be taken for granted. It requires attention and effort and focus. Following Jesus is not just ambling along somewhere in his vicinity. Nor is it a matter of “I don’t feel like it today: perhaps I’ll do it tomorrow”. Peter’s point is that we are to be purposeful in following Christ: that we are **committed** to the challenge of living as his followers.

And so he calls us to **discipline** ourselves, and to be focussed on our goal. Why fight in a war? In the **hope** of victory and peace. Why do **we** fight in

this spiritual war? Because of the hope we have in Christ. Peter in the opening chapter of his letter has already emphasized the hope we have, which is bound up with the resurrection of Christ. We look forward to the blessings promised through Christ: to the fullness of the blessings of the kingdom of God, to the new creation where there is no war or evil or fear or death. Where perfect love shall be the way of life. We live as those who are preparing for life in the eternal kingdom of God.

Right now we, like people throughout the world, are living in times of restriction and sacrifice and the loss of many things we normally take for granted. Why do we do this? In the hope that we and others will not be touched by the virus. And in the hope that as we and others make these sacrifices, the problems caused by the virus will be overcome more quickly and effectively, and we will be able to move back to normality in a safe way. You may have seen those news stories of Americans protesting about restrictions placed on them, many of them somehow thinking that displaying their guns will make their point more convincing, and I feel so sad. For them it seems to be “all about me”. But life is never just “all about me”. The more important issue is: how can we do good for each other? That is surely the question that matters. The protestors are making the hope of a safe move back to normality harder to fulfil. Our hopes do make a difference to our actions: we can be thankful that most Australians have understood that. And at the spiritual level, if our hope is in the promises of God, we can be confident that our hopes will be fulfilled in God’s time.

In our reading Peter goes on to spell out how to live as followers of Christ, as soldiers of Christ. We are to be **different**: not just taking on board the values and priorities of others, but turning away from the self-centred way of life that is so common in our society. We are to be **holy**, which is basically being different: actively seeking to reflect the character of the holy and righteous God in our lives and actions. If we seek to do that, we will indeed be **obedient to the truth**, as Peter says, and our inner being will be purified by the Holy Spirit.

And the other thing which Peter emphasizes is **love**: love in action, not just theoretical love. Genuine mutual love, deep love that is from the heart: that is the way he describes it. First and foremost, that means love for one another, a real concern for each other’s well-being, a readiness to do what we can for each other. In these current circumstances, it may be phone

calls and emails. If we are going out, there may be things we can drop in to help each other, or even letters or cards (remember them?) that we can write or send, reminding each other that we are there and that we care.

We live in strange times. As Easter was very different for us, so Anzac Day has been very different. But our Lord and Saviour doesn’t change, and his promises do not change. And the challenge to live a committed life as his followers doesn’t change, even though we must put it into practice in different ways in different circumstances.

So may we gird up the loins of our minds, so that we are ready to live purposeful and disciplined lives as Christ’s followers. When it is hard to keep going, let us keep our hopes fixed on the wonderful promises of God: on the life that he opens up through the risen and living Christ. Let us not allow ourselves to be self-centred even if everyone else seems to be. Let us be willing to be holy, to be different. And let us love each other from the heart, praying for each other and staying in touch with each other and doing what we can for each other.

And of course that love will not be limited to our church family or our own family, but for our neighbours, for those who live nearby and for others whom we can serve. Perhaps part of that active love will be not only contributing to our Parish’s financial needs, which I trust we will continue to do, but thinking of what we can generously give to others in need: it might be Christian Community Aid in its work with people in great need, our Mission for the Month, or perhaps if we are knitters, making a blanket or two for Rough Edges as winter draws nearer. Of course, there are many others lovingly serving people in need that we might support in these times.

Yes, we can truly think of ourselves as soldiers of Christ, not glorifying war and violence, but faithfully serving our leader who has already secured the victory over evil and death: the one who welcomes us into his kingdom, and who calls us to live as people who are truly committed to that kingdom and its people, and of course committed to its king, our living Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Paul Weaver