

WBC 24 April 2005

Acts 7:55-60 - The stoning of Stephen

A Reflection by Geoff Wraight

## **ANZAC – What kind of Australia would you die for?**

Tomorrow morning is the commemoration of the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the so-called Gallipoli Campaign.

On the morning of 25 April 1915, the first wave of 1500 Australian troops landed at the rocky outcropping just north of what was to become known as ANZAC cove on the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey. The ambitious and ultimately futile plan was to try to overcome the heavily guarded Dardenelles straight that would eventually allow the allies to provide supplies to the Russians and thus turn the tide of the first world war.

By nightfall on April 25 over 15,000 Anzacs had been driven with heavy casualties back to beaches by the Turkish 19<sup>th</sup> Division and the military leaders realised they had no hope of achieving their original objectives and considered withdrawing.

Instead, they decided to stay and over the coming months small and extremely costly small advances were made resulting eventually in a stalemate that lasted nearly 8 months until finally by January 1916 the entire force of 80,000 troops were evacuated.

It was a disastrous, bloody and brutal part of a terrible war.

The statistics are staggering.

The total number of men in the landing forces numbered nearly 75,000 and consisted of British, French, Australian and New Zealand corps.

Of these, 21, 255 British, 9798 French, 8709 Australian and 2701 New Zealand men died. Not to mention nearly 87,000 Turkish troops who died defending their country.

In all the total death toll numbered 130, 562 sons, brothers, fathers and friends.

This terrible and violent battle, that when examined for what it is, is no different that the horror of any of the wars that have plagued human history, has become for Australia part of our national story known as the “Anzac legend.” The remarkable battlefield photography and the evocative accounts of Phillip Schuler (and Age journalist who travelled with the first convoy to Gallipoli) were the elements that helped to connect a young nation’s sense of identity to the courage and sacrifice of these young men on the other side of the world.

Though Australia's foundation day is celebrated on 26 January, it is Anzac Day which releases the deepest feelings about the birth of the nation.<sup>1</sup> In celebrating the sacrifice of those who died 'in defence of our freedom', that freedom came to be understood not just as the freedom of British citizens living in the Colonies of Australia, but the freedom of Australians themselves. Anzac Day is the symbol of all that was noble and admirable about ourselves and our particular struggle against our past and our environment (despite the male-centred symbol of the 'digger').<sup>2</sup> Thirty years ago Anzac Day suffered a great decline in interest as in the wake of the Vietnam war.

Yet it has survived, and has gain increasing support from a younger generation. Thousands of young backpackers make a pilgrimage to the Australian graves at Gallipoli and they are there now.

Despite the fact that the Gallipoli event is turning into a bit of a tourist party and political photo opportunity, it is still a key day in the life of our nation.

Hugh Mackay suggests that ANZAC day;

It is no longer, as people once thought, anything to do with the glorification of war. It is about sacrifice and hope. More than any other day in our calendar, it calls on us to answer some curly questions. Who are we, these people for whom so many others gave up their lives? What are we making of this way of life for which people were once prepared to die? Are we building the kind of nation that justifies the sacrifice of so many, not only those who died, but those who thought our ideals were worth fighting for?<sup>3</sup>

In other words, What kind of Australia do we love? Or what is it that we love about Australia?

Unfortunately in recent years the over-emphasis on Gallipoli itself and the tendency of our current Politicians to ignore and trivialise the innocent victims of war and violence in our current involvement in a war that has very dubious justification and our own colonial history – misses the opportunity to deepen the questions that ANZAC day wants to asks us.

For example, if it makes sense for John Howard to say in one of his speeches, "We settled the land, fought the fires and withstood the droughts. We fought at Gallipoli and later stood against murderous tyranny in Europe," then in exactly the same sense it make sense to say, as a previous Prime Minister did, "We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. we committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers."

National pride and national shame, are two sides of the same coin. It is possible to be proud of the good things and ashamed of the evil while still loving the country and its people. Sometimes this is painful love. But the kind of patriotism that is being made popular today is the version that ignores all the negatives and ridicules anyone who doesn't. Rather than love of country it is in fact a kind of jingoism.

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<sup>1</sup> As Ann Curthoys puts it, "it is not too much to say that in Australian popular political culture, commemoration of war displaces the political formation of the nation through federation as the emotional locus of a sense of nationhood." Ann Curthoys, "Mythologies," in *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, ed. Richard Nile (St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2000) p. 27. It needs to be noted also that ANZAC day is, of course, celebrated in New Zealand as well. I am concerned here, though, with its *function* in Australian culture not just its official meaning.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful summary of the development of the Anzac Legend see Richard White, *Inventing Australia* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1981) pp. 130-39.

<sup>3</sup> Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future* p. 8.

Be that as it may, out of the horror of war there are numerous stories of humanity breaking through and overcoming the dominance of the military landscape.

Two of the most celebrated hero stories in our Australian war history and not stories of Great Generals or campaign leaders. They are not stories that emphasize the very male stereotype of cold aggression in determination in the face of the enemy...

They are in fact, the story of Simpson and his donkey and the story of Weary Dunlop on the Thai – Burma railway.

Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick was enlisted in the ANZAC core and was part of the early landing group at Gallipoli. Famously, he used a small donkey to carry men down from the front line, often exposing himself to fire. The bravery of this "man with the donkey" soon became the most prominent symbol of Australian courage and tenacity on Gallipoli even though he was killed four weeks after the initial landing.

Edward Weary Dunlop was a medical officer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and was captured and forced by the Japanese to work with groups of Australian Soldiers on the Thai-Burma Border. In the extremely difficult conditions he maintained his commitment to caring for the sick and injured POWs. He also showed respect toward his Japanese overseers who were often cruel.

In both these stories it is the gentle humanity of these men as well as their courage that shines through in the most violent of situations.

But there is another less well-known story that like others is becoming part of the myth that speaks of what we most truly value about Australia. (and a brief warning that this story contains some mild course language).

A number of German Jews who fled to England in World War II were arrested by the British as enemy aliens and sent to Australia on a ship called the Dunera. They became known as the "Dunera Boys". As they were being marched to an internment camp on the fringes of the desert, a soldier guarding the stragglers handed one of them his rifle and said: "Here mate, hold this while I go and have a piss." Telling the story later, the Dunera boy said he knew then that he was in heaven!

Commenting on this story, Raimond Gaita notes how far that soldier's beautifully simple acknowledgement of a common humanity with his prisoner was from the mean-spirited treatment of some forced immigrants and asylum seekers in recent times.

Which brings us to the story of Stephen in today's reading.

We meet Stephen first in the midst of the early church community, chosen as the first ever deacon.

His reputation as a person of Spirit, wisdom, and faith singled him out in the church's expanding ministry.

Stephen's witness triggers jealousy that leads to secret charges brought to the council known as the Sanhedrin. Stephen appears on trial before them. His defence takes the form of a sermon that is recorded earlier in Acts 7.

Stephen's pretty strong serve about the killing of prophets, culminating in the murder of Jesus, sets the stage for the rage with which the part of the story we read this morning opens.

Stephen's vision of Jesus standing at God's right hand is the Easter message embodied: Christ reigns in glory. Those who hear this cover their ears to block out what was, to them, blasphemy. Stephen's testimony seals their charge against him. Stephen must die.

Now, one obvious conclusion from this story is that if you get elected a Deacon you will probably be stoned to death. (Which may explain the difficulty we have in getting more Deacons, Ernest!)

But the most powerful part of this story of violence and murder is the way in which he dies and the last words of Stephen. In his dying words, Stephen recognises the humanity of his executioners and prays that their sin not be held against them. This and his entrusting of his spirit to the resurrected Christ bring his life and death into parallel with Jesus.

But One wonders about the effect that these words of forgiveness had upon those who took up the stones to kill and upon the young man who held their coats, Saul.

We meet Saul again later in Acts: first in avid persecution, then in awestruck conversion, and eventually in faithful witness.

Did Saul find himself unable to flee from the grace encountered in Stephen's witness? Scripture does not say. It is intriguing to speculate if Saul recalled Stephen's dying words for the writer of Acts.

In this story the power of resurrection faith is demonstrated in the courage and love a young man who in the face of violence refused to let go of his vision of shared humanity. Of the possibility of forgiveness of the possibility and power inherent in the simple act of loving your enemies and those who are different from you.

We see this same transforming love present in other non-violent peace leaders like Oscar Romero and Martin-Luther King whose own deaths only produced seeds of love and shared humanity that grew into movements that toppled governments and transformed societies..

But I think it can be glimpsed too in the best of our Australian character..

Yes, I love my country and yes, I love its possibility of a uniquely shared humanity expressed in its myths and legends. And yes, I love it too because the spirit of resurrection faith is able to find expression here in a way that is unique.

And despite its failings and shame, this country of ours can be transformed by the Gospel because it speaks to and out of the very heart of who we are.

Let us continue to pray and work with courage and hope.

Amen.