

# Anzac Day

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 22 April 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Ron Brown and Des Perry

Easter 4B

John 10: 11-18; Psalm 23 (sung); Contemporary Reading:  
*Attack by Siegfried Sassoon*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

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## RON BROWN

On Wednesday morning, Anzac Day, Warwick and I and a few others will be singing at the Dawn Service in Martin Place. It's called the Dawn Service, but actually it starts at 4.30 am. It's the pre-dawn. It's a quiet time of reflection – it's amazing to feel the silence that comes into Martin Place and the surrounding street that are usually so noisy and busy. Our choir has been singing there since the Dawn Service started there in 1930 when it became official. It commemorates the service and dedication of those thousands of young Australians who went to war, not knowing what would happen to them or whether they'd return. A lot of them made the supreme sacrifice and did not return. They were everyday heroes, perhaps. At the time of the Last Post, the lights in Martin Place are shut down. In the darkness, then, people are able to remember and reflect on the lives of those people – some of whom were relatives, others were people we did not know at all.

Then the one minute's silence in the darkness is quite reflective. Could I quote from the Sydney Morning Herald Editorial this morning, where they say: *This is not a day of glorification of war. It's a day to reflect on what a terrible event war is and to honour the sacrifices of those who served.* While it was started with the timing of the end of the First World War, of course it commemorates all of those events that have happened since – the Second World War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and all those other wars that have followed. That's in our recent lifetime, but we're forgetting all these other wars that have happened in the thousands of years before us.

At this particular service, our choir has been singing a song, another poem by Gordon Johnston. I can't find out much about him, but since 1935 (that is 83 years) we have been singing the same song at the request of the Dawn Service Trust. The words are:

*I tell you, they have not died,  
They live and breathe with you;  
They walk here by your side,  
They tell you things are true.  
Why dream of poppies sod  
When you can feel their breath,  
when flow'r and soul and God  
Knows there is no death!*

*I tell you, they have not died,  
Their hands clasp yours and mine;  
They are but glorified,  
They have become divine.  
They live! They know! They see!  
They shout with every breath;  
All is eternal life, there is no death*

I'm sure we could have a robust theological discussion about that if the time was available. But that'll be another day!

The retired choir from our choir will also be singing the same song at a later service at North Ryde RSL, which is a Dawn Service starting at 6.30.

We went to Villers-Bretonneux in France in 2013, with the choir, on the way to a male choir festival in Cornwall. We were invited to sing there at the Dawn Service and we sang the same song. We were also invited to stand with the French at the War Memorial on the Champs Elysees, the L'Arc de Triomphe, where we sang the French & Australian National Anthems. We remember these people once a year, but the French do it every day – they lay a wreath on the L'Arc de Triomphe memorial every day. And on Saturday is a special day when the band marches up and they have a bit more of an extended service with a marching band.

Villers Bretonneux in France is mentioned in the paper that they are thinking now of extending our focus on Anzac Day to the war on the Somme. It's an unforgettable experience seeing the acres and acres of white crosses with the names of young men who did not come back.

*"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"*

If you have been reading the commentary in *With Love to the World* this week, you will notice that today was called Good Shepherd Sunday in the Catholic tradition and the ultimate put up or shut up test (says their commentator) is being willing to die for the sheep, willing to die for the truth.

Clearly Jesus and the early Church put their lives at risk for what they believed.

Our history books are full of heroes or unwilling heroes standing for justice and the right.

The Reformers in our church, and the Dissenters in particular, paid the ultimate price, or at least extreme punishment for the stands that they took. I saw something on the TV recently that reminded me of the Quakers and George Fox – the very heavily punished Dissenters. One of their three central slogans was "*Where the Spirit of the Lord, is there is Liberty*". 2 Corinthians 3:17. It's above our pulpit here. If they'd been Salvation Army banner-carrying people, that would have been on their banner, I think. They were later known as The Religious Society of Friends. George Fox was penalised because he wouldn't attend the services of the Church of England, he wouldn't carry arms for the King, he wouldn't pay the tithes to the church and he wouldn't say the creeds that he was required to say in the Anglican Church. Perhaps he should be a Patron Saint of Pitt St Church!

Then there's other revolutions - the French Revolution of the people there who stood for justice and freedom and the rights of the poor. Freedom Fighters in many countries of the world. Our forebears in Scotland and Ireland were fighters against the powerful Establishment and the rights of people. The Union movement over the years, standing for the rights of workers. The Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King.

In recent years, the 1978 Oxford Street march for justice and equality for gay people. I don't think anyone died in that march, but there certainly are people dying for the same cause in other countries around the world that we should be standing for. The Students in Tiananmen Square on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1989.

Finally, the commentator in *With Love to the World* says "*perhaps we've had it easy. We don't have those sort of demands on us these days! There may not be a tank that we can stand in front of. Don't feel guilty about that. Rather find some way of supporting those whose stand and commitment is a life and death matter*".

My final suggestion is we have proposals and causes that we suggest to our annual planning days. Are these causes that we are prepared to die for? I hope they are. We don't have much time left to make a difference.

## **DES PERRY**

When Margaret contacted me last week, I was down in Bundanoon. It was a very poor phone connection, I could hardly hear what she was saying – it was quite crackly. But she basically said: *would I be prepared to give a short talk today* and it was to do with Anzac Day. Then she said something about the Gospel reading has been very misunderstood over the years. Then the phone cut out.

So it left me with this wondering whether I was going to tell you something that is understandable, or whether I was going to tell you something that is new!

There are a four things that I want to say today which many of you, my friends in this congregation, may not know about me. It's not that I'm gay by the way. You all know that!

For those of you who are visiting, Margaret is our Minister in this church. She approached me about the Anzac Day tradition because I worked for Department of Veterans Affairs for quite a number of years – and she thought that I might have something to share.

The reality is that I come from a family that is not connected to the military, except peripherally. My father would have dearly loved to have been a war hero, but unfortunately, the war finished when he was 15. I never aspired to be a war hero, but the Vietnam War for Australia finished the year I turned 18. So I never got the call-up and I don't regret that. I was a student in high school and I marched in the moratoriums with a lot of my fellow year 11 and 12, against the Vietnam War.

So, that is two things you don't know about me. But one thing I do know, having worked for DVA in the counselling service for a long time, nearly 20 years, is that there are families where military service is generational.

The very first people who came to the counselling service with PTSD out of East Timor (which was a peace making and then a peace keeping exercise) were pretty much all young women who'd been sexually assaulted – or – they were young men whose father had been a Vietnam veterans. Now it wasn't always the pattern, but it was very clear in those early days.

I started to look at this and it turned out that a lot of the Vietnam veterans were of an age where their fathers were older than my father – and they went to the Second World War. And in their turn, 20 years earlier, their fathers, their grandfathers served in the First World War. So, it's a generational thing, where people are coming with a family experience of war – are often there because the sons, their fathers, their grandfathers were involved in war.

For me, it wasn't like that, because my father was too young, my grandfather was a farmer (although he was of an age where he could have been sent to war. He didn't, because it was an essential service and he stayed on the wheat farm. My paternal grandfather ran a tin-ware factory in Perth, so he didn't go to war and neither did any of my father's older brothers because they were needed to make things for the war – metal things.

I worked for the DVA from 1996 to 2015 – and during my time there, I heard many stories. Stories of terrible things that soldiers witnessed when they were in Korea, Vietnam, East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq and Rwanda and a few stories of terrible things that they did. The telling of the stories was part of the healing process that both I, and the counsellors I supervised explored as we provided PTSD and psychosocial counselling to veterans and their families.

I am utterly opposed to war, so what can I say about ANZAC day without being sanctimonious or smug?

I started to think about the gospel reading – and wondered what Margaret might have meant when she said it was misinterpreted. We will have to wait another three years (in the lectionary cycle) to hear what Margaret thinks and whether or not what I think coincides or resonates with her. I suspect that it might have something to do with how the first people who heard this story may have received it.

We have a tainted view of scripture because we have been bombarded with sometimes conflicting metaphors in this Gospel (the Gospel of John), and the other three Gospels, the letters, the church dogma and practice, Sunday School, sermons. For example Jesus is both the Good Shepherd – but is also the Lamb of God; Jesus is the gate (I suppose that's closing in or closing out), but he is also the way. So there are any number of "I AM" statements in the Bible: "I am the way;" "I am the Good Shepherd!"

So, I googled "progressive theology" and this gospel reading and found some helpful views from the Rev Dawn Hutchings from the progressive Lutheran church north of Toronto. This started to resonate with me and my thoughts about war. And I wonder whether they will resonate with you? She says:

*The writer of the Gospel of John was a master craftsman, skilfully weaving together the images of Yahweh that his Jewish listeners would have understood in a heartbeat. They knew their own Scriptures and the images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd would have carried them beyond the sheep in the field to the words of the prophet Ezekiel who echoed the promises of Yahweh to the people of Israel. They would have heard Yahweh instruct the prophet to speak out against the religious authorities, the shepherds who had led the people into dangerous territory and allowed the flock to be scattered and lost.*

*They would have heard Yahweh promising to send a proper shepherd, a good shepherd, who would gather the flocks, tend their wounds and restore them to good pastures. And they would have known that this Jesus was such a shepherd. And they would have rejoiced to have such a shepherd in their midst. And they would have understood perfectly why the religious authorities accused Jesus of being possessed. For surely the religious authorities were the shepherds who had led the sheep into dangerous territory.*

I wondered if this might also be helpful to our thinking about ANZAC day. To me the key is not Jesus as the good shepherd, but the people as the sheep:

- The sheep have a good shepherd who puts their needs before his.
- The sheep are known and they know the shepherd.
- The sheep are not abandoned even when the wolf comes.
- The sheep are in different pens.
- No matter which pen the sheep are in they are one flock and they all hear the shepherd's voice.

How I view war, and ANZAC day is born out of my experiences, my family and my culture, and I believe that the challenge to me is to see beyond my sheep pen, and to value and honour the experience of others as they seek to heal over the disruption, devastation and horror which is war. We have many rituals – ANZAC Day is one - which seek to do this, and which progressively are seen, not as a nationalistic promotion of the glories of war, but as a sad reflection on the futility of war, even when they were fought against – or for - wolves and tyrants.

Number four – you don't know this about me! I love heavy metal music so I will finish with some lyrics from Michael Butler, Ozzy Osbourne, Tony Iommi and William Ward, better known as Black Sabbath.

War Pigs lyrics © O/B/O Apra Amcos