

SERMON FOR THE 4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This verse contains one of the most well-known images of Jesus, that of ‘The Good shepherd.’ It is an accessible image, a reassuring image, depicting God as caring, loving and faithful.

This imagery has found itself into Christian images of sacrifice and love. For example, it is an image that has been used in connection with the significant events we commemorated this coming week as we remember our troops of both the Great wars. In the context of war memorials the image reinforces God’s loving care for the dead as well as their sacrifice, the shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep.

For this image has been a source of hope and meaning-making for many. It is an attempt to bring some sort of purpose out of death and suffering. And this is in fact one of the ways in which we try to articulate the history of the ANZACs. We seek meaning and purpose through religious imagery and religious language. We witnessed this in the many prayers that are said at the state memorial services, all conjuring up images of sacrifice and love. This is admirable, and reflects the importance of such images in remembering those who died.

But there is however another side to the use of religious images such as the Good Shepherd in regards to conflict. Such religious images can be used to justify war and create a sanitised view of not only war but in fact the message of the Gospel itself.

This tension can in fact be found by looking closely at the image of the Good shepherd. The image of shepherd is a fascinating one. For the life of the shepherd was anything but picturesque. It was dangerous, risky, and menial. Shepherds were rough around the edges, spending time in the fields rather than in polite society. They lived a hard life.

And just as we need to be careful not to glorify the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we must be careful not to glorify the reality of war.

For Jesus as the Good Shepherd is more than just a picturesque green hillside and white fluffy sheep, it speaks of a man who did not shy away from the difficult places in the world, and from tackling the difficult questions. And so it is the same of war, and all conflicts in which we find ourselves in. We have to be open to its harsh reality, its disturbing truths and the difficult places it takes us.

We see this right now with the events of the past weeks as military action has been taken in Syria. This is a complicated conflict, more complicated than the fight against Nazism that took place in World War 2. For this is a civil war. And with the horrors of the 20th century in our minds we are very weary of getting involved in conflicts around the globe that don't threaten our borders or the borders of our allies. We don't know where this conflict will end up, all we know is that human beings still wage war and terror on each other.

And in light of this it is fascinating to witness the now thousands of NZ's who flock to ANZAC dawn services and pilgrimages to Gallipoli. These events are now obviously very meaningful for a large portion of the population.

It seems to have offered a large number of New Zealanders a shared identity, a shared history and a shared tradition, all things for which the Church once often provided. And perhaps if anything it shows us in the Church that people still seek to make meaning of their lives in the face of suffering and despair, in their remembering of the casualties of war.

But in this increase of remembrance we must be careful not to glorify war and its horrors in the same way as we must always be careful not to turn the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd into a safe pastoral image and tame the radical call of the Gospel of unconditional love.

And so I propose we try and find a way forward with our images, perhaps acknowledging their weaknesses and their strengths. And in the same manner honour those men who in sincerity went to war for the love of their country, often not fully aware of the horror that

was to meet them. We must in our critique of the glorification of war never take away the fact that they believed what they were doing was right, and so in turn honour them for their courage.

It is a bit like the beautiful stain glass image behind me here that was this community's way of honouring and remembering those men who lost their lives.

It is easy for us to perhaps be critical of its militaristic iconography depicting a fallen soldier represented as a knight receiving his crown of Glory from the Kingly Jesus. But for those who established this window, it was their way of coming to grips with the horror and tragedy of war. They wanted to honour their fallen as heroes, to make meaning of their loss and to see them as men who followed in the footsteps of the Great Shepherd of the sheep, laying down their lives on behalf of many.

And so as we sit here today with a variety of images, we must learn that every image must be looked at carefully, with open hearts and minds, never taking for granted what we see. Jesus as the Good Shepherd offers us those two sides, the loving, nurturing God, as well as

the God of the margins, who calls us to difficult places and asks us to grapple with difficult questions.

And it is the same of our ANZAC commemoration this week, we honour those men who died heroes of their time, but also men who confronted the horror and futility of war and paid with their lives.

By doing this we can truly honour them in death as in life, as real people, remembered, cherished and loved by God, the great Shepherd of their souls. And the great shepherd of our souls, who reached out not as a King on a throne, but became a servant, and walked the way of the cross, the road less travelled, the road of the Shepherd, to gather his sheep.

Amen