

We Will Remember

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on 14 November 2010, by David Gill. It was Remembrance Sunday, with a church parade of the 30th Infantry Battalions attending.

On behalf of the people of St Stephen's, I welcome those who are here because of links with the 30th Infantry Battalions, under their various names and in the different permutations they have had through the years. The relationship between your units and this church goes back a long way. We at St Stephen's are reminded of it every time we look at our walls and note the battalion colours that were laid up here nearly 50 years ago. You are welcome in this church, for it is your church also.

It is particularly appropriate that the 30th Battalions' church parade takes place on Remembrance Sunday.

Last year saw the death of Harry Patch, the last survivor of British troops who fought amid the carnage of the Western Front during the First World War. He died in July 2009, at the ripe old age of 111. Shortly before his death, Patch took part in a TV interview in which he was asked what he thought of Remembrance Day. Not much, he replied. The observance in the UK was, he said, "just show business".

That may or may not have been a fair comment. Never having been in Britain for Remembrance Day I am in no position to judge. Either way, it's probably an understandable response. If you had been through hell on the Western Front, any commemoration of the experience would seem trivial by comparison.

However understandable, Patch's comment should stir us to think carefully about what we think we're doing when we mark this day. It's an important issue -- not only because we want to do justice to the past, but because Remembrance Day helps our nation shape its future. Who, what and how we remember influences how we perceive this country, what values we think it holds and what policies we believe it should adopt.

Australia's yesterdays are never fully past. They linger, to define our todays and influence our tomorrows. So we'd better ensure that the way we approach Remembrance Day is responsible, informed – and inclusive.

You see, there is a danger in remembering. The danger stems from our human propensity to edit out memories that are uncomfortable or disturbing, memories that don't sit well with who we like to think we are.

For example, my generation at school learned Australian history – if we learned it at all! – as seen through white eyes. The shameful bits, the painful bits, the bits known all too well to indigenous

Australians, were largely edited out. Our remembering of Australia's past was ill-informed and incomplete, and for that ignorance the country has paid a heavy price.

What do our Remembrance Days need to be like, therefore, to qualify as informed and inclusive?

First and foremost, we must remember **people**.

- Those who have died while serving in the defense forces of this country, some quite recently. Those who have grieved for them, and in some cases still do. Those who came back, but often with scars, visible or invisible, that may have lasted a lifetime. We will remember them.
- Those who suffered and died as military personnel of countries that were at the time our allies. And those that were at the time our enemies. They shared the same anguish, their families knew the same grief. We will remember them also.
- The many victims of our wars who were not in uniform. We know, for example, that men from the 2/30th Battalion were among the 2,800 Australian prisoners of war who lost their lives building the Thai-Burma railway. We sometimes overlook the fact that more than 30 times as many (90,000) Asian labourers died in the same infamous undertaking. Of the 60 million killed in World War 2, some two thirds (40 million) were civilians, many of them women, children and old people. As warfare becomes technologically more advanced, its toll of civilians relative to military personnel continues to increase. We will remember them too.

People. Of many nationalities, many colours, many faiths, many political persuasions. Every one of them a child of God. Every one a cherished human being. Every one of their deaths a tragedy. Yes, we will remember them. All of them.

Second, we must remember **war** for what it is and, remembering, we will name it for what it is: evil. Sometimes a necessary evil, perhaps, but evil nevertheless. War is never glorious. With that memory, we will resist political leaders who want to take us too quickly, too easily, into yet more armed conflicts. We will challenge public opinion when it defaults too enthusiastically to violence as a way of solving world problems.

It was General Dwight Eisenhower who said "I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, as only one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity".

Those of you who are film buffs will know "The Bridge on the River Kwai". It's a bit shaky historically, but still one of the greatest movies ever made. Remember the closing moments? The bridge had been destroyed, a troop train brought crashing into the river, most of the key players had been killed, silence was descending on a scene of utter devastation, and the POWs' medical officer who had seen it all happen makes his response. "Madness!" he says, three times. "Madness!... Madness!" At one level, it is a comment on the story line of the film; at a deeper level, a comment on war itself.

Madness. Yes, we will remember that too.

Third, and especially on this day and in this holy place, we must remember **the divine Reality** that stands within and beyond the heartbreaks of human life and the tragedies of human history.

Yes, the pain and loss were all too terribly real. For some, they still are. Yes, war was horrific. In some places right now, it still is. But the hate and the horror, the evil and the anguish, do not have the final word.

In a few minutes, we will use a prayer offered a couple of months ago before the Grave of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. It was said there by a man once known as Private Joseph Ratzinger, a serving member of Hitler's Wehrmacht. He is now rather better known as Pope Benedict XXVI.

As we pray in those words of a man who once was our enemy, be very thankful to the God who turns enemies into friends, hurt into healing, despair into hope.

Be grateful to the one who lifts us from humanity's worst failures, offering the ever-present possibility of new beginnings.

Be thankful for the light that shines even in our darkest nights; for the compassion that hatred cannot conquer; for the love that goes to a cross, and beyond, for a world like ours and for people like us.

We will remember. Yes, we will remember. And, in all our remembering, we will be thankful.

*