

War and “Peace!”

A sermon preached at St Stephen’s Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 1 May 2011, by David Gill. Readings for the second Sunday of Easter were Acts 2:14a,22-32,1 Peter 1:3-9, St John 20:19-31. The service was attended by members of the American-Australian Association, marking the Battle of the Coral Sea (4-8 May 1942).

On behalf of St Stephen’s, I welcome the Consul-General of the United States, representatives of the Australian Defense Force and the NSW Police, members of the American-Australian Association, and all who have come to mark the anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Sixty nine years ago today, ships and aircraft from Japan, the United States and Australia were converging north-east of Townsville for a series of naval engagements that were to enter history as the Battle of the Coral Sea. It would be hailed as “the battle that saved Australia” – although, given what is now known of Japan’s military intentions, any such label probably belongs, more properly, to the Battle of Midway, a month later.

But we’re not here now to debate history – that’s for the historians. We’re not here to weigh the military significance of the Coral Sea clash – that’s for the strategists and tacticians. We’re not here to assess the close US-Australia alliance which the battle came to symbolize – that’s a job for governments, diplomats and experts in international affairs.

No, we mark the battle in this act of worship because, so close to our shores, it cost the lives of 1622 human beings, Japanese and American, each one of them a child of God. We grieve for them. We remember their families and friends. And we ponder before God the tragic madness of war.

Some of you who’ve been to Singapore may have visited Kranji War Cemetery. On a gently sloping hillside to the north of the island, Kranji looks out over the Straits of Johore towards Malaysia. It is quiet there. You stand, immersed in the silence, coming to terms with the sad beauty of the place.

You start reading the markers on the graves. A number of things strike you. First, they were so young. Teenagers, many of them. In Australia today they’d still be at

school. So young. Second, there are so many. Thousands of headstones, uniform in shape and colour, lined up meticulously, like an army on parade. So many.

Then the real horror begins to sink in. What you see, you realize, is not the half of it. Those headstones mark bodies that were found – but many more were never found. Here are only the dead from British and Commonwealth forces. The Japanese were for the most part cremated and their ashes returned to the motherland. Here we have only military personnel. The many civilian casualties were buried, or cremated and their ashes held, elsewhere.

Moreover, this is but one cemetery, from the brief Malaya-Singapore campaign. There are many like it, some very much larger, all over Asia and the Pacific, in the United States, and Australia, and elsewhere. Imagine them all put together: you would have a vast carpet of headstones stretching further than the eye could see. And that's from only one part of one war, in a century that was littered with them.

Turning to leave, you glance back one last time at all those graves. Into your mind spring the words of an old Egyptian prayer: "God of the ever-present crosses, help thy servants". But what help can there be? Is there any hope for us, anywhere?

I recall wrestling, years ago, with a similar question, but in a very different context. It was the early 1980s, and church leaders from different countries had gathered, to focus on the situation in South Africa. That country's future was looking bleak. Apartheid seemed entrenched forever. Yet when Desmond Tutu addressed the gathering, he sounded surprisingly upbeat. Later I tackled him for his (to my mind) unwarranted optimism. Why, I wanted to know, was he so hopeful? I expected a shrewd political analysis based on an insider's knowledge of the situation. Instead, I got an unabashed statement of faith.

"Why am I hopeful? Because Christ is risen, man," he said, with an enthusiastic thump that almost dislocated my shoulder. "Christ is risen!"

He's dead right. That faith perspective makes a difference to how you see things. A very big difference.

We sang about it a few minutes ago: “Death’s mightiest powers have done their worst, and Jesus has his foes dispersed”. That is, on the man of the cross the powers of hatred, destruction and death focused their awesome might. But they failed. And they will fail.

Oh yes, they’re still around, of that we are only too painfully aware. Oppression and injustice remain. But if Christ is risen, they no longer have the final word. Hatred and death are still running wild. But if Christ is risen, their power has been dethroned. Darkness still looms large. But if Christ is risen, the light of divine love forever outshines it.

In today’s gospel, we heard of one of the encounters between the risen Lord and his friends. “Peace,” he says to his followers. Not once. Not twice. Three times. In that culture, “Peace” [=shalom, salaam] was a standard greeting. But here the word seems to carry a special loading.

Jesus is not just saying hi to his friends. He’s not simply wishing them peace. He is promising they will have it, as they face the dark days ahead and continue the work of the Father in his absence.

The promise is not for a quick fix, a sort of spiritual sleeping tablet. Or for an escape from the real world. It is the assurance that we are accompanied, through life’s shocks and tribulations, through history’s battles and bereavements, by one whose triumphant love holds us in good times and in bad, in life and in death. It is the sure certainty that Christ is Lord.

Later in this service we will exchange the greeting of peace. We do it every Sunday. What we often overlook, I suspect, is that the response originates with that ancient Easter greeting.

What we’re doing is assuring each other, as Desmond Tutu assured me -- but without, please, the shoulder dislocation! – that Christ *is* risen, that this *is* a new day and that, wonder of wonders, we are ourselves caught up in love triumphant.

Peace be with *you*. Always.

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