

We Will Remember

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on 16 November 2014, by David Gill. It was the Sunday after Remembrance Day, with the 30th Infantry Battalions attending. The readings were Romans 8:31-35,37-39 and St Luke 6:32-38.

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 forms they have taken 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 whenever we look at our walls and note the battalion colours that were laid up here 52 years ago. You are welcome in our church, for it is your church also.

Today is a day for remembering. Let's make sure our memories start where they should: with the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, whom we acknowledge and honour as the first custodians of the land on which this church stands.

It is important to be clear about what we're doing when we mark Remembrance Day -- not only because we want to do justice to the past, but because how we view the past affects the way we shape the future.

Sir William Deane liked to remind us, when he was governor-general, that Australia's yesterdays are never fully past. They linger, to define our todays and influence our tomorrows. So we'd better ensure that our remembering is responsible, informed and inclusive.

There is a danger in remembering. It stems from our human tendency to edit out memories that are uncomfortable or disturbing, memories that don't sit well with who we like to think we are. The enemy's atrocities we can talk about. Our own, we can't. It's understandable. It's human. The plank in one's own eye is always harder to deal with than the splinter in someone else's. The easy way is to ignore it. The better way is to recognise it and, where possible, do something to fix it.

Remembrance Day started in response to the First World War. That remains its focus, and rightly so. But, gradually, it has come to embrace later conflicts as well. Why not earlier conflicts too? A few weeks ago, a member of the federal parliament said we should not lose sight of the Boer War, which she called "the

beginning of Australian military history” in 1899. Good point – except that Australian military history began much earlier, in 1788.

It is long overdue that this nation should start its remembering at the beginning, with those who died in Australia’s founding civil war. Civil war? Use that expression to the average person in the street and you will get blank looks. What civil war?

And there precisely is the problem, indeed the tragedy. Most do not remember.

I refer of course to the undeclared war of – call it what you like, “European Occupation” or “Indigenous Resistance” – the frontier violence that started in 1788, ran until the Northern Territory’s Coniston Massacre in 1928, and cost at least 20,000 lives, probably many more. You will listen in vain for any mention of it on Remembrance Day. You will search in vain for any sign of it among the memorials and honour rolls found in our churches.

But those Australians, too, deserve to be remembered. Black and white together, they were caught up in Australia’s founding tragedy when two worlds collided. Black and white together, they gave their lives for the sake of what they believed to be the best interest of their peoples. Black and white together, they were loved by God, mourned by their families and friends. Black and white together, they mattered. Their memory should matter to us.

Beyond starting at the beginning, what does Remembrance ask of us?

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

- Those who have died while serving in the defence 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. Today, by coincidence, is also Germany’s national day of mourning, known as

Volkstrauertag. Our enemies 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 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 several years 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 has become rather better known as Pope Benedict XVI.

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, beyond all the sorrow of our remembering, we will be thankful.

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