Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell
Rector of St James'

Choral Evensong

Anzac Sunday
24 April 2022

Readings: Psalm 46;   2 Samuel 22: 2-20;   Hebrews 10: 32 – 11: 1

"The World is Out of Joint"

It is with a degree of apprehension that I approach this Anzac Sunday, being mindful of both the current events in Ukraine and the recent decades of unsuccessful wars in which our defence personnel have been involved - such as the invasion of Iraq and the lengthy operations in Afghanistan.

Historically, war seems to achieve extraordinarily little except when it comes to defending oneself from an aggressor. Our sympathies in Australia are currently with the Ukrainian people as they heroically defend themselves against the devastating aggression of the much larger Russian military.

Having seen such destructive behaviour down through history, it is with trepidation that we wait to see what might happen next, yet it remains difficult to know what is actually happening on the ground.

Back in the eighteenth century, Dr Samuel Johnson wrote:

> *"Among the calamities of war may be jointly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates, and credulity encourages."*
> (from The Idler, 1758)

This is where we get the idea that 'truth is the first casualty of war'. Similar to what we have seen with both the pandemic management and in electioneering, the application of propaganda, conspiracy theories, and fake news are used by all sides of those who are at war. It is difficult to be discerning, so perhaps we should start with experience.

Families at War

As is the case with many Australians, I grew up imbued by a narrative about war and service in the armed services. My father served in the Royal Australian Air Force during the Second World War, flying in Lancasters with Bomber Command in the UK.

He and his crew were some of the lucky ones that survived their thirty-six sorties and returned to Australia. Like many of those who served, my father talked little of the war but we in the family knew intuitively that it had a significant bearing on his life.

The little I could glean of his experience came from the occasions when his crew got together for a reunion and recounted their darks days in England during the War. The commentary, however, was more often about the funny things that had happened to them, or possibly the close shaves they had flying these hulking pieces of metal and their cargo of bombs.

One of my favourite stories concerned some bragging in the mess about who had flown the lowest level run over Europe. There were stories of flying under bridges and powerlines and hitting fish that were rising from the lakes. A week later dad had obtained the indisputable evidence that his crew had flown the lowest when the tail gunner came down with German Measles - caught while over Germany!

Despite these stories, I could deduce from the comments made by my father and others that war was not a glorious thing; indeed the opposite. I came to understand that its destructiveness in just about every conceivable way was not something to be commended. Yet, for this crew of aviators, the bonds built under the pressure of conflict were formative and unbroken.

My teenage years were during the time of the Vietnam War. It was a fractious time in Australian society in general and in my own family. My father had little support for the Vietnam War, seeing it as irrelevant to the security of Australia and more a pandering to the interests of the United States. As a result he was forced to resign his position as Vice President of the local RSL Sub-branch.

The situation became more complex when one of my brothers was conscripted for military service. He volunteered to serve in Vietnam and subsequently joined the Regular Army, going on to serve for thirty years, including two tours in Vietnam with the 3rd Battalion RAR. Nevertheless, he became cynical about the conduct of this War, understanding it as being run more on the agendas of the politicians rather than to good military strategy. At this point my father and brother found common ground.

As for me, I reached adulthood after the Vietnam War but came to serve in both the Army Reserve with the Armoured Corps and in the Regular Army as a chaplain. Mine was not an experience of war but of peacekeeping. It is quite a different experience to serve on operations when the aim is to bring peace rather than the defeat of an enemy. Indeed, peacekeeping operations have been some of the most successful deployments of the Defence personnel in recent decades. But why have wars in the first place?

Politics by 'Other' Means

Of course, war is principally a political thing. The early nineteenth century Prussian general, Carl von Clausewitz, wrote a treatise *On War*, which was completed after his death. It has become one of the basic texts about modern warfare, in which von Clausewitz's contended that "War is a mere continuation of politics, by other means." Likewise, Chairman Mao Zedong of China channelled von Clausewitz when he wrote in 1938: "Politics is war without bloodshed, while war is politics with bloodshed".

Von Clausewitz separated the aspects of the political motivations for war into the three elements of 'Purpose, Goals, and Means'. These factors feed the political reasoning and legitimations that are then reflected in both military and non-military strategies. Obviously, the military strategies are concerned with engaging and defeating the enemy. More interestingly, the non-military strategies include propaganda, economic sanctions, and political isolation - as we are currently seeing in the Russia-Ukraine War.

Another Prussian, Prince Otto von Bismarck, was Chancellor of Germany in the late nineteenth century. He was a devotee to the political doctrine of 'realpolitik'. This idea is concerned with the use of both pragmatism and the exercise of power to achieve political ends. It is like the 'whatever it takes' ethic we currently see in Australian politics where truth and ideals give way to manipulation, bullying and opportunism. To this end, Bismarck was happy to use war as a means of creating political instability thereby providing a situation in which he could achieve his political agendas.

Bismarck's realpolitik came to dominate much of European political thought in the early twentieth century, creating an environment conducive to both the First and Second World Wars, and it remains a factor in most major conflicts up to our own times. Suck knowledge is helpful for understanding how things operate, but what moral justifications are there for war?

Blessed Are the Peacemakers

The Bible presents us with an ambiguous view of war. Jesus appears as a pacifist, as described in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) where he says it is the peacemakers who are the blessed ones, condemns anger against anyone, and urges that if someone strikes you then you should turn the other cheek.

Jesus' pacificism is unsurprising for several reasons. First, he did not seek to fulfil the human desire for a political messiah who would raise up an army and throw out the Romans. Second, nor did he advocate the establishment of an earthly kingdom of political and military power. Indeed, he understood that there was no point to trying to overcome the powerful Roman forces by military means. Instead, he subverted power by promoting

a kingdom 'not of this world' where peace and justice reign – the antitheses of earthly power and realpolitik. St Paul likewise did not condone the use of violence and war as part of the Christian way.

Nevertheless, if you want a Biblical justification for war you are likely to find it in the Old Testament where it exists in abundance – including the aspects of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Sadly, this has been the recourse of many tyrants through history. It has also been a position adopted by some Christian groups in our own times, such as many of the Religious-Right groups in the United States, the neo-Nazis, and more recently the Russian Orthodox Church! So what do we, as Christians, do about conflict and war?

One ethical position has been the 'just war theory' developed out of the writings of St Augustine of Hippo. This theory recognises that war and conflict is the result of human fallenness and sin, reflected in the murder of Abel by Cain in Genesis chapter four. Nevertheless, Just War Theory states that it is ethical to be violent:
- In self-defence, if there is a reasonable possibility of success,
- As a preventive war against a tyrant who is about to attack, and
- In a war to punish a guilty enemy.

Yet there are ethical limits to how such a war is to be waged; such that the response should be commensurate with the evil, one may not attack innocents or kill hostages, and that war is only legitimate as a last resort.

The problem remains, however, that our motivations for going to war are not always pure and that the real reasons can be dressed up with the arguments for just war; we therefore need to be discerning. As we have now come to understand, attacking Iraq for weapons of mass destruction was actually a front for securing supplies of oil.

Eternal Vigilance

War is not to be glorified or praised, instead it is part of the curse and tragedy of human frailty that only God can change. Those who have a spiritual perspective on life understand this and are therefore keen to ensure vigilance in seeking to avoid such conflict in the future. We must always be vigilant, not only of a threat from a possible enemy but also of our own behaviour; for it is easy to forget just how quickly corruption and injustice can cause conflict to erupt in any society.

Faith, hope, and love are the ethos of a community that brings peace and justice. God's message for us is one of reconciliation; it is a message of 'life' rather than 'death' as exemplified in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is because the resurrection is the ultimate sign of God's love for the world and the hope of new life beyond conflict that is offered to all.