

THERE IS A TIME FOR EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on Remembrance Day, 11 November 2019

Whenever I contemplate the events that we celebrate this day, I find myself in a quandary. The young Australians and New Zealanders who went to war early in the last century did not do so because their countries were in imminent danger of invasion. They responded to an imperial call and went to war on the other side of the world. Many of them went with such apparent enthusiasm to fight for a place that they had never seen yet referred to as “home”. I do not know what perceptions they might individually have had about the war that they were to fight. Certainly, they had no participation in the events that led up to it. They played no part in the conflict of empires from which it emerged.

It is true that their presence in this country had come out of large scale British imperial desires. It is also true that, as rural workers, for example, the imperial markets in primary produce provided their livelihoods, so they had something to lose. But I imagine that such a calculation was far from their minds.

Soldiers coming from other British imperial territories were mostly in the same situation. Even those who came from Britain itself, who were in danger of invasion, were still at a distance from the great events of state that drew them into the conflict. The Armistice that we celebrate today brought an end to the horrible carnage but its terms laid the seeds for the next great world conflict and we were again in a world war.

Our later wars have been much more contested in their origins than the two that I have already mentioned. When I was conscripted into National Service in 1957, it was thought that we might be destined for the conflict in the Suez Canal; our Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, had promised Australian troops. Fortunately for us, that conflict never emerged. The Vietnam War and the various Middle East conflicts, however, rested on dubious grounds and have also laid the seeds of more conflict. Their contested origins have then affected those whose duty it was to fight them.

We also need to acknowledge the ongoing cost of our wars, whether their origins have been contested or not. People of my generation, myself included, lived in families carrying the costs of war through damaged parents. We know only too well that such costs have not diminished.

My quandary lies in recognising both the unsavoury origins of the conflicts of our times and the courage and devotion of those in the field. It is for this reason that my attention was captured by our reading from Ecclesiastes about there being a time for everything. The reading is in the form of a poem outlining the various things that might and do happen, originally in the author's world, but also in ours.

This is a very popular reading for funerals and occasions such as today. It would be easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that the inclusion of an activity means that it a good thing, that they all have, as it were, divine approval. The intent of the poem is not to justify the actions mentioned but to note that they all happen. Joy and sorrow, delight and trouble come to us all.

¹ Readings: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Psalm 96:1-13; Revelation 21:1-7

Nevertheless, the use of opposites allows us to see that some of the activities are desirable, others undesirable. A time to be born is a time for rejoicing. A time to die is a time for sorrow and mourning.

In some of the lines, the desirable event comes first, to undesirable second. Those lines that are like this are mostly about the natural progress of things: birth, death; planting and pulling up. These are things that will always happen in that order and, in the long run, are inevitable.

The ones that are the other way around, where the desirable comes second, are usually things that we ourselves can correct: weeping followed by laughter; mourning by dancing. This brings us to the line about war. In this line, war comes first, followed by peace. That is to say, where war happens, peace is the goal.

The verses that follow the reading that we heard, shed light on what this poem is about. The author asks, "What gain have the workers from their toil?" All these things happen, but are we any better off? The author goes on to say that, although we have a sense of past and future, we still cannot understand everything that happens. Furthermore, our experiences are repetitive. "That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is." Which brings us back to where I began: the plight of those who are caught up into conflicts that they do not and cannot understand or control.

Our second reading talks about a new heaven and a new earth, where "mourning, crying and pain will be no more." This is a much more difficult passage. The first reading resonates directly with our experience, the second may sound like foolish idealism as well as a kind of spiritual analgesic for the pains of the world.

That's not what the author of revelation thought. His world was also one of conflict and pain, largely through persecution of the emerging Christian community. Thus, it was not unreasonable for him to encourage his readers by ensuring them of ultimate values that must triumph. He was not principally asking his readers to do nothing but wait until a new world was delivered to them. On the contrary, he was encouraging them to continue in the path that they knew to be correct.

And this is where our two readings meet. If the time of war is to be followed by the time of peace, that will happen only because we are encouraged to persist in peacemaking activities. We then become more critical of those who lead us to wars, and exert more control over the events of our lives. Only thus will the sacrifice of those we remember today be honoured.