

## ON NOT FORGETTING<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, 13 November 2022, being Remembrance Sunday**

About this time last month, Father Ron directed our attention to a verse from the Wisdom book, Ecclesiastes:

This, however, you must know: I find that God made man simple; man's complex problems are of his own devising.<sup>2</sup>

This text sprang to my mind when I agreed in the following week to preach this morning. In my high school history course, we studied the causes of the First World War. Our textbooks divided them into immediate and underlying causes. The most important immediate cause was the assassination, on 28 June 1914 in the city of Sarajevo, of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His assassin was Gavrilo Princip,<sup>3</sup> a Bosnian Serb inspired by a growing Yugoslavian nationalist movement.

The underlying causes had principally to do with a clash of empires. The German and Austro-Hungarian empires looked enviously at the success of the British and French in forcefully colonising parts of the world, particularly Africa and Asia, and wanted a share in the spoils. America, which came late into the conflict, was on the imperial sidelines but became one of the war's principal beneficiaries. Germany believed that its time had come. It entered into a "blank cheque" alliance with Vienna, which guaranteed mutual support and encouraged the Austro-Hungarians to take on Serbian nationalism. With grandiose intentions, the competing empires recklessly began their decline by going to war.

So began a conflict that caused somewhere about 9,000,000 military deaths, more than 10,000,000 civilian deaths from both military action and consequent causes such as malnutrition. In total, between 15 and 22 million people died, about 2% of the world's population. Military casualties on all sides were about 22,000,000. Australia, with its population of 5,000,00, lost about 60,000 men, 1.2% of our population.<sup>4</sup>

It is said that generals fight a new war with the tactics of the old. Modern weaponry, the machine gun, the tank, the submarine, and the aircraft, destroyed the old tactics and brought the fighting in Europe to a murderous stand-off in the trenches of France and Belgium. The cavalry disappeared. The successful charge of the Australian Light Horse at Beersheba on 31 October 1917 is regarded as the last great cavalry charge, even though those regiments were not true cavalry but mounted infantry who used their horse for transport but fought on foot.<sup>5</sup>

As in all wars, nobody came home unscathed. Our apartment overlooks the former lunatic asylum of Callan Park. If you walk around its waterfront, you will see the repatriation wards, built after both world wars, in which were housed those diagnosed as "shell shocked", what we would now call PTSD. Even those not so diagnosed, carried internal wounds for the rest of

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25; a Song of Isaiah (12:2-6); 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:29, Jerusalem Bible 1966

<sup>3</sup> [Gavrilo Princip - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>4</sup> War casualties are hard to quantify. See [World War I casualties - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Beersheba: The Charge of the 4th Light Horse \(awmlondon.gov.au\)](#)

their lives, preferring not to discuss their experiences with anyone. My father had that reaction after World War II. Veterans still exhibit the same consequences.

The effects carried on for many years. Indigenous Australians who enlisted, although not counted as citizens and being principal victims of the horrors of colonisation, did not receive a hero's welcome on return and were excluded from most of the benefits provided for their fellow soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

I have made no mention yet of the women who served or of the families waiting at home for news of fathers, uncles, sons, brothers, cousins, and boyfriends. Neither have I mentioned the social divisions caused in Australia by disputes over conscription, which pitted Irish Catholics, themselves victims of British imperialism, against their Protestant fellow Australians. Conscription was twice defeated at the polls, meaning that all Australian soldiers were volunteers.<sup>7</sup>

The armistice came into effect at 11 am on 11 November 1918. It was a much-welcomed end to the so-called "war to end war".<sup>8</sup> Its harsh terms, however, contributed to bringing the world to war again in 1939.

All this we can characterise in a brief poem by G A Studdert Kennedy, a decorated Church of England chaplain in France during the war:

Waste of Muscle, waste of Brain,  
Waste of Patience, waste of Pain,  
Waste of Manhood, waste of Health,  
Waste of Beauty, waste of Wealth,  
Waste of Blood, and waste of Tears,  
Waste of Youth's most precious years,  
Waste of ways the Saints have trod,  
Waste of Glory, waste of God,– War!<sup>9</sup>

This, however, you must know: I find that God made man simple; man's complex problems are of his own devising.

It is not hard to move from World War I to this morning's gospel. Jesus and his disciples are in the temple and observe the glories of the building. All the contemporary accounts confirm that it was built of shining white marble and gilded in every possible place. Yet, Jesus says, it will be torn down and destroyed, never to rise again. In one sense, it could easily represent the supposed glories of the European empires before they themselves tore down that grand edifice. And, Jesus said, his followers will be confronted by wars and rumours of wars.

Yet, Jesus resists the invitation to declare an end to the world, even though times will be very tough. Instead, he encourages his followers. As characterised by Tom Wright, Jesus says:

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<sup>6</sup> [Australian Indigenous service during World War I - Anzac Portal \(dva.gov.au\)](#) and [Indigenous Australian soldiers - World War I and Australia - Research Guides at State Library of New South Wales \(nsw.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Conscription during the First World War, 1914–1918 | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> [The war to end war - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Waste - Woodbine Willie's poem - Revd Tony Miles Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy - Wikipedia](#)

‘Don’t let anyone deceive you’; ‘[take the] chance to tell your story’; ‘I’ll give you wisdom’; ‘you’ll keep your lives through patience’. These are still precious promises, to be learnt ahead of time and clung to in the moment of need.<sup>10</sup>

We are often easily deceived by others speaking with authority. We often find ourselves unable to give an account of our faith. We fail in our search for wisdom, and we lose patience. More importantly, we don’t need a world war to find ourselves in such difficulties. This is what we face all the time.

Isaiah, both in the Canticle we had as our Psalm this morning and in our first reading, presents a different world from the one that we know. He talks about a new heaven and a new earth; an earth where people live full and contented lives, where there is a future and where traditional animosities disappear. Isaiah gives us a vision of the kind of world that we would all desire for ourselves and for our children. As we look back, we may feel that history shows us the impossibility of such a world. As we look around now, we may see such a vision rapidly disappearing. The temptation for the preacher who has travelled thus far is to lapse into empty reassurances and platitudes. I hope to do neither and I will have failed if that is what you take away.

All I want to say is that such a vision must be maintained against all difficulties. The book of Proverbs says:

Where there is no vision, the people perish<sup>11</sup>

We owe that much to those who have gone before us and more to those who will follow us.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone), London, SPCK, p. 253.

<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 28:18 (KJV)

<sup>12</sup> [In Flanders Fields by John McCrae | Poetry Foundation](#) [John McCrae - Wikipedia](#)



The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand



Gavrilo Princip



British soldiers “going over the top” in the Battle of the Somme  
1 July 1916 – 18 November 1916



Douglas Grant, Samuel Browning and Charles Blackman  
Australian Aboriginal WWI servicemen<sup>13</sup>



Australian troops on the way home



Chaplain G A Studdert Kennedy



John McCrae

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<sup>13</sup> [Indigenous Anzacs: Letters home from Aboriginal WWI diggers reveal humour, sadness - ABC News](#)