

St. John's, Toorak

**Sermon on the Centenary of Armistice Day,
11 November, 2018**

Immediately outside St. John's stands an impressive stone and brass edifice, with steps at its base which those waiting for the no. 58 tram often sit upon. On hot days commuters shelter in the shaded side, and as the day goes by, move round as the sun arcs across the sky. The commuters rarely look up at the brass and stone above them – but visitors, historians, and family members certainly do, bending their necks back to read the names of those remembered on what is called the “Monument for Parishioners.” Built in 1923 the “Monument for Parishioners” reads like the Toorak phone book and our parish roll: name after familiar name, many from families who still live here but whose families would be far larger and fortunes far different, had their sons come home.

The names on the brass are the dead, a loss of not just locals but an Australian future: our future surgeons, architects and clergy, poets and musicians, husbands, partners, lawyers, politicians and activists, those who would serve the community, heal, inspire, lead us. Who would have, given the chance, made families and grown gardens and gone to the football and sat in the moving shadow of a memorial to someone else, whilst waiting to catch the tram.

This “Monument for Parishioners” was built to honour and remember those who had died in the First World War. Later names were added from those who died in the Second World War, and the entire memorial restored through a combined effort of this church, our friends at the Toorak Sub-Branch of the RSL, many of whom are here this morning, and by the support of our Federal Government in this seat of Higgins [whose representative The Honourable Kelly O'Dwyer, is with

us this morning] Yesterday morning a bouquet of Australian native flora appeared at its base, banksias and eucalypts paying silent tribute to the sacrifice of so many of this church and this community.

The mostly men of the memorial were part of a far larger and almost incomprehensible sacrifice which saw Australia irrevocably changed. Of the then total Australian population of approximately 5 million, 300,000 young men went to the Great War from 1914 to 1918. Of those 60,000 died – one in five – and 156,000 – another half – were wounded or taken prisoner. To put that in perspective, Melbourne’s population is now 5 million – so think of every 16th person on the tram or in the street or in your office going to war, disappearing to an unknown future – and more than half of those coming back wounded or not coming back at all.

To you returned soldiers of any conflict here this day, we pay tribute to you and we thank you for your sacrifice for us and our peace.

But just as the commuters and the passersby don’t always look up at the names on the Memorial and stop and pause and think, too often neither do we. The mantra handed to us by four generations has been and remains, “Lest We Forget.” Yet we *do* forget the sacrifice of so many for so long, such that a national day like today is necessary, provoking a national remembrance of the unimaginable loss that lies at the heart of our then infant Australia, 13 years a nation and already knee deep in blood. We forget the Great War because that’s what time does, it marcheth on, and new joy and new calamities fold in, one after each other, and time stretches on and fresh wounds become old scars, and young returned soldiers old veterans, and new wars and new animosities rise and fall, and young people still go to war and some even come back.

So one hundred years on we now pause and look back, lest we forget.

The Memorial to Parishioners describes the fate of a slice of a generation who went to war in the name of Empire, Australia, in the defense of democracy and in the name of God. At the time of Federation in 1901, Australia could rightly be described as a Christian nation, in a way that it cannot now. All but one percent of the population declared in the national Census of 1901 that they were Christian. Forty percent of the population was Church of England (renamed the Anglican Church of Australia in 1981), twenty-three percent Roman Catholic, and 'other Christian' (mainline and unaffiliated Protestant) comprising the remaining thirty-four percent. Migration from Europe after 1945 and the Second World War and immigration from south-east Asia from 1970 during and after the Vietnam War changed Australian religious life with an increase of adherence to other religions occurring alongside a decrease in the number of those Australians professing Christian belief, or indeed, any belief at all. Tragically the wars that many fought in the name of God, rendered belief in God impossible.

By the year 2011, only sixty-one percent of Australians considered themselves Christian. By contrast, Australians describing themselves as having no religion at all had risen from virtually zero in 1901, to fifteen percent in 2001, a figure that rises to twenty-five percent if one includes those who did not state any religious affiliation at all.

Which begs the question, would we go to war again for God and the things of God: the defense of the poor, the weak, the refugee, the disadvantaged, the vulnerable?

In like vein many of our soldiers on the Parish War Memorial not only fought for God as it were, but also fought for King and country. We might be enamoured by their Royal Highnesses

Harry and Meghan, but would we go into battle for them?
Even more pointedly, would we go to war for our country?

With the demise of religion, faith in God, any God for that matter, with a suspicion of established government, both here and abroad – see here Trump, Macron, Bolsonaro, and dare I say it, the seat of Wentworth and the continued sway of racism and xenophobia in our country - what now would we go to war over? Would we prepared to sacrifice another generation – one in sixteen - to defend another nation overseas and a more broader way of life here in Australia, when nationalist instincts, and inward looking policies are on the rise?

More precisely, would we go to war to fight for the right to imprison children on Manus Island? – I think not. Would we go to war to defend our appalling history of treatment of indigenous Australians? Of, still, our marginalizing of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters? Would people fight for the right for the church to defend its maltreatment of a generation of Australian children? I think not. Whilst this might sound overly dramatic, the culture that produced the generation of Australians who willingly sacrificed themselves in the Great War - has long since gone. Our faith in God, our faith in the monarchy – for God and King – has also been significantly eroded.

It has been eroded, I would posit, not least because of our uncomfortable relationship with the mantra, “Lest We Forget.” Too often we have indeed forgotten about the misery of war and marched into another one, forgetting the sacrifice of the returned soldier sitting next to us this morning. Lest we forget at Federation we were at war in South Africa; a bare 15 years later at war in Europe; 20 years after that, again in Europe; ten years after that in Korea, 15 years after that in Vietnam, 15 years after that our first but not last military engagement, in Iraq.

On Armistice Day 1918 in London, precisely one hundred years ago, a baby was born precisely at 11am. He was named Pax (meaning peace) in deference to the moment. In 1939, as a soldier aged 21, he would be shot dead in the outbreak of World War Two.

It seems we do indeed forget, and we forget often. For in each and everyone one of this last century's wars, we have built more and more memorials like the one outside the front of this church, with more and more names inscribed upon them. We have more war memorials per capita than any other nation on earth. They stand because in more and more homes, parents and partners and children have waited for door bells to ring to see their child, their partner, their parent, come home - and they haven't.

This is not to say that these battlefields are not necessary. Too often, unfortunately, they are. Dictatorship, the slaughter of innocents, the Holocaust, the Cambodian killing fields - all these undoubtedly needed military intervention to stop. But are we careful enough, peace loving enough, that as a nation we do all that we can, all the time that we can, to take a peaceful road? To bend sword into ploughshare and see as blessed the peace-maker? Or is that mere pulpit idealism?

I hope we can be idealistic both as a people and a nation. We hear Jesus teach us this morning who shall be blessed, in a sermon way better than this one on a hilltop 2000 years ago. It is so true, so accurate, we've repeated it for two millennia. In the so-called Beatitudes he tells us that blessed are the poor, for God's kingdom awaits them; that those who mourn, shall receive comfort; the meek, who shall inherit the earth; those who hunger for righteousness, filled up; the merciful shall receive mercy; the pure in heart, a vision of God, and the peacemaker called children of God. And we know, deep down, I hope, that this is true.

These values, these teachings, are the hallmark of not only great people, but great nations, who are prepared to fight for what is good and of God, but who also, *also*, will sacrifice in peacetime selfishness, greed, violence and hatred, such that all people shall live in the peace, harmony and trust which is worth fighting for.

It is my prayer this Centenary of Armistice Day that we as a church, as a community and as a nation, shall be known as people of the Beatitudes: merciful, meek, pure in heart, thirsting for righteousness and making for peace.

Let us pray. God of love and liberty, we bring our thanks today for the peace and security we enjoy. We remember those who in time of war faithfully served their country. We pray for their families, and for ourselves whose freedom was won at such a price. Make us a people zealous for peace, and hasten the day when nation shall not lift up sword against nation and neither learn war any more. This we pray in the name of the one who gave his life for the sake of the world: Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. **Amen.**

The Revd Dr Peter French, Vicar

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