

The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand
Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa

Remembering War and Peace (1914-2014)
Marking the Centenary of the Commencement of the First World War

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(There follows the sermon preached by The Revd Allan Davidson in the Kings College Memorial Chapel, to mark the centenary of the beginning of World War One. The event, on 3 August 2014, was hosted by King's College, and planned by a working group representing staff and students as well as members of the AHS Committee.)



Citizens' War Memorial in Christchurch's Cathedral Square
For the New Zealand Dead of World War 1
Unveiled 9 June 1937
Designed by:
William Trethewey (stonemason); George Hart (architect)

In the name of God: Creator, Peace Maker, Life Giver.

We are here to remember:

- to remember a war which changed the course of history.
- to remember and honour men and women who displayed heroic courage, self-sacrifice for noble ideals.
- to remember and honour thousands from our own country, killed or injured in body and mind.
- to remember and honour all those profoundly affected by the war.

We are here to remember.

One hundred years ago on Tuesday, Lord Liverpool, the New Zealand Governor, read a message from the King. George V expressed his 'confident belief that in this time of trial my Empire will stand united, calm, resolute, trusting in God.' New Zealand in return acknowledged it was 'prepared to make any sacrifice to maintain her heritage and her birth-right.'¹

No one anticipated the nature of the cataclysmic conflict that dislocated Europe. No one anticipated the scale of sacrifice it would demand. Colonial soldiers were drawn by the attraction of adventure to volunteer. Many feared the war would be over before they got there. Over the next four years, a zealous crusading spirit, gave way to the long depressing slog of war. The conflict bogged down in the trenches of Western Europe. Volunteering at home slowed; conscription was introduced in November 1916. Growing war-weariness was matched with a dogged determination to win at all costs – otherwise death and suffering would be in vain. The names of Anzac Cove and Chunuk Bair, the Somme, and Messines, Passchendaele and Ypres, were etched deeply into our collective memory.

In thinking about the First World War, it's easy to be overwhelmed by statistics. More than 100,000 New Zealanders served overseas; over 18,000 were killed; 40,000 plus injured. New Zealand's pride in the sacrifice made by her soldiers was accompanied by deep grief, scarring the hearts of two generations. Those killed were more than statistics. They were grandchildren, sons, fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles. Among those who lost their lives were women serving as nurses.

Nearly one hundred years later, we are gathered in this sacred place to remember the start of that conflict. 'Lest we forget' are words inscribed on many war memorials.

We are here to remember.

Remembering can be a painful undertaking. On the one hand there is a need to honour the sacrifice of those who were killed. On the other hand, memorials are a reminder of the suffering war produces. No less a figure than the Duke of Wellington in the nineteenth century said, that 'nothing except a battle lost can be half as melancholy as a battle won.'

Kings College Chapel is a powerful statement about how people honoured and remembered those who died in war; built as its foundation stone says: 'To the glory of God and in memory of the Old Boys who gave their lives in the Great War, 1914-18.'

For New Zealand families there were no bodies over which they could grieve. Memorials such as this chapel, honours boards and public monuments became surrogate graves, naming loved ones whose bodies, if they had been found at all, were buried on the other side of the world.

One of the most outstanding war memorials in New Zealand stands beside the shattered Anglican Cathedral in Christchurch. Above the tableau of four figures representing youth, peace, justice and valour is an angel, standing at

the foot of the large cross. In her hands the angel has the sword of war. You can almost feel the tension as you see the angel looking at the bent sword – will it break and bring an end to warfare. Originally the angel with the sword was called ‘Victory’, ‘but it was decided that it would be inappropriate to call her this.’²

The memorial was not unveiled until June 1937. The Great War, the war to end all wars, was now being viewed through the mounting crisis in Europe and Asia. While the allies had won the war in 1918, by 1937 the drums of war were being heard again. And so, the angel stands with her eyes looking heavenward and the sword of war is unbroken. Beneath the cross and the five figures there is a seated woman – ‘Sacrifice’ – with eyes downcast and hands outstretched in an attitude of resignation, suffering and desolation.

Churches are in the business of giving meaning to both life and death. Sacrifice, suffering and hope are at the centre of the Gospel narrative. Not surprisingly, people faced with uncertainty, death and injury in war, sought comfort from Scripture. The Psalmist’s appeal to God, as a ‘refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble’ was offered as reassurance. The Psalmist described the chaotic world: ‘The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter ... the earth melts.’ This is countered by the confident assertion, ‘The Lord of hosts is with us.’ People were told God was on their side. The Psalmist confidently asserts that God ‘makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear.’

When war was declared, the Auckland Diocesan Gazette stated: ‘We believe in a moral God, and to Him we appeal’, quoting from Psalm 44, ‘Through Thee we will overthrow our enemies.’

One of the most challenging questions that war raises for Christians is, ‘Where was God in all this?’ Did God have any part in the conflict? Whose side was God on? If God was involved,

why was there so much carnage and destruction of human life? Why, in God’s name, did the war go on so long?

The God of Battles, with the church’s blessing, was co-opted to consecrate the war; to sanctify sacrifice; to promise soldiers paradise. Pierre Berton wrote, that ‘Nations must justify mass killing, if only to support the feelings of the bereaved and the sanity of the survivors.’ The churches contributed to the rhetoric used to make sense of the conflict. The concepts of sacrifice, duty, loyalty, comradeship, patriotism, empire, helped give meaning to the loss of life and offered comfort to the relatives of those who were killed.

An interesting contrast to this approach was provided by Charles Studdert Kennedy, the remarkable Anglican army chaplain. In answer to the question, ‘Where is God in all this?’ he wrote in 1917: ‘God suffers now and is crucified afresh every day. God suffers in every man that suffers. God, the God we love and worship, is no far off God of Power but the comrade God of love.’³

This idea of the suffering God, a God found in no-man’s land, counters the God of Battles who takes sides. The suffering God is found in the pain, the anguish, the injuries, deaths and grieving, experienced by all sides in war. This suffering God is symbolised in a cross and not a throne. Studdert Kennedy wrote, ‘I don’t know or love the Almighty potentate – my only real God is the suffering Father revealed in the sorrow of Christ.’⁴

We live in the shadow of a century in which war has brought incredible suffering: Two World Wars (the Holocaust, Hiroshima) the killing fields of Cambodia, and so much more. And now there is the suffering in Israel / Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. ‘The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting.’⁵

We can argue about the causes of war; the rights and wrongs of those who take sides. Sometimes

evil has to be stopped by force. We cannot escape, however, the suffering that war causes and the legacy of hatred and bitterness it can create.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about sacrifice and suffering; but it is also about love, compassion, reconciliation and hope. Paul, when he instructed the Roman Christians as to how they should follow Jesus, told them, to 'Live in harmony with one another'; 'If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all'; 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' There is a better way than war.

Today we remember. May our remembrance be seen in the ways of peace, love and

reconciliation; in the pursuit of justice with compassion; in the relief of suffering.

Shirley Murray, in her hymn for ANZAC Day, gives us the poet's vision:

'Weep for the waste of all that might have been,
Weep for the cost that war has made obscene,
Weep for the homes that ache with human pain,
Weep that we ever sanction war again.

Honour the dream for which our nation bled,
Held now in trust to justify the dead,
Honour their vision on this solemn day,
Peace known in freedom, peace the only way.'⁶

Grace and peace be with us all.

Endnotes

¹ *Evening Post*, Volume LXXXVIII, Issue 31, 5 August 1914, Page 8.

² Chris Maclean and Jock Phillips, *The Sorrow and the Pride; New Zealand War Memorials*, Wellington: Historical Branch, 1990, p.135.

³ Stuart Bell, 'The Theology of 'Woodbine Willie' in Context', in *The Clergy in Khaki: New Perspectives on British Army Chaplaincy in the First World War*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, p.95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.98.

⁵ T.W. Adorno, cited by Jay Winter in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.228.

⁶ 'Honour the Dead / Hymn for Anzac Day', Number 102, Words © Shirley Erena Murray, *Hope is Our Song: New Hymns and Songs from Aotearoa New Zealand*, New Zealand Hymn Book Trust, 2009.