ANZAC Service Reflection

Just before sunrise one winter morning, I clutched my piccolo in a freezing hand and marched with the other members of the Wellington and Hawkes Bay Regimental Band towards the parade ground at Waiouru Army Camp.

As we turned the last corner the steady rhythm of our marching faltered and there were gasps of wonder. Ahead of us was Ruapehu, majestic and serene, the early morning sun gleaming on snow laden slopes.

It was a surprising reaction from my fellow Bandsmen, not normally given to enthusiasm about the beauty of nature!

The unexpected beauty of that moment lent an added poignancy, as we played a couple of hours later at the passing out parade for the soldiers who had just completed their basic training. They looked so young and vulnerable with their newly shaved faces and no 1 haircuts.

The dignitaries who made speeches, talked of values like commitment, loyalty and mana, of making a difference and standing up for what is right. And nobody could argue with those.

Nothing violent was said, nor was there any mention of the risk involved in being a soldier. In fact one speaker addressed the parents of the young soldiers directly, reassuring them that the army was family for their sons and daughters now **too**, and would take care of them.

 I wondered at that. Members of the New Zealand Defence Force still pay the ultimate price and “lay down their lives” in the course of their duties.

So I thought about these young people and the choice they had made. Why had they undergone the gruelling training? What were their hopes and dreams? How would they cope in the complex world conflicts they might be asked to enter?

Conflict comes at many levels. The people in our New Testament reading today were living through some internal church conflict. Less devastating than situations modern armed forces encounter, but still destructive for the individuals involved.

Perhaps a little of the back story will help illuminate the reading.

1st John was written somewhere between 90 and 100 CE to an early church community which had experienced a divide through a difference of belief. Some of the members had left. Much doubt and fear seem to have resulted. ( Manser et al 2009)

The writer speaks into this situation giving instructions to support the people and keep the community strong. He calls them back to the roots of their faith urging them in verse 23 of our reading to “Believe in the name” of Jesus and to “love one another”.

We would probably all nod our heads and say “yes, yes” to the “love one another” bit of that- though we might also admit that it’s hard to put into practice. But the first part about believing in the name of Jesus has a slightly overzealous feel to it, especially as it is framed here as a “commandment”.

That might have worked for those 1st century Christians, but it doesn’t really speak to our questioning post modern souls.

However Marcus Borg explains that “believing” means much more than intellectual assent. It also involves relational faithfulness,radical trust and an enlarged worldview. (Marcus Borg ‘Lenten Homily’ at explorefaith.org)

Add to that the understanding of the words “the name of Jesus” as faith in all that Jesus is and does, all that he stands for, (Guthrie and Motyer 1970) then the whole phrase opens up and we can find a way forward.

This is not about a somewhat superstitious and desperate clinging to a narrow, “correct” faith. It is much more about a process, a search and almost certainly, a struggle. It’s about living with integrity.

Sometimes I find it hard to understand the voices of the New Testament, across the gulf of two millennia, from a very different culture and way of speaking. How could the experience behind those words be interpreted in a life-giving way for us in our day?

Maybe it would look like this…

(have a look in the order of service under the title of the reflection!)

Our **intention** is focussed on Jesus, on all that he is and stands for.

We **reflect** on what that means in our lives. How could relational faithfulness, radical trust and an enlarged worldview become embodied in each of us?

We put that into **action.**

And the **motivation** supporting this, the essence of it all is LOVE.

It’s a bit simplistic perhaps. We have limited knowledge of and control over much that happens around us. We get distracted, make mistakes and lose connection with what is really important. Sometimes we end up in places we hardly recognise.

Lining this process up so that it is real and deeply embedded in our lives takes a lot of commitment and energy. It’s probably a lifetime’s work.

 But I think this is what reaching towards integrity means.

I’d like to share an example from my own life.

In my early 20’s I discovered that I enjoyed looking after elderly people when I worked in a local Rest Home one summer. The residents appreciated how I cared for them and my employers thought I had some potential.

Being a religious order of nuns, they thought of this as a gift from God that should be used in the service of other people. I wondered about all this. I was surprised to find that I genuinely wanted to make sick and suffering people feel better.

 I was also beginning to discover a spirituality of my own and was intrigued by Mother Theresa and the way she spoke of God and Jesus, and serving others.

What was I to do?

I somewhat tentatively started to make applications to become a nurse.

The joys and consequences of that choice have continued to unfold throughout my life. Being a nurse has formed who I am today.

 But there was much I didn’t know and couldn’t have imagined when I started. Every decision carries a risk and sometimes a cost.

The initial cost for me of my newly discovered path was that my relationship with the young man I was engaged to at the time ended.

Later I struggled with the risk of making mistakes when caring for vulnerable people and the effects of work related stress.

But I don’t regret that choice.

In that long process, I’ve occasionally had an awareness of a spirit of love, strong and fierce, or sometimes calm and gentle, with me.

Perhaps you too have been through a similar process in your chosen field of endeavour.

 The beauty of that process of intention, reflection, and action undergirded by love, is that it can find expression in many different ways.

It is possible to be a nurse or equally to be the CEO of a DHB with self awareness and the desire to help people be healthy.

It is possible to be a research scientist or a volunteer at the local opshop with a yearning to learn and contribute to the wellbeing of others.

And it is entirely possible to enlist in the army or to protest for peace, both with the intention of making the world a better place and out of love for your country.

This might have been stretching it for the writer of 1 John, who was a man of great dualisms! Light and darkness, love and hate, children of God and children of the devil are the way he sees things and there are no grey areas.

These dualisms may have given urgency to his call to hold to the tradition. They may have strengthened a vulnerable community, but they also unceremoniously excluded those who thought differently.

It is clear from the rest of 1 John, that the writer, who speaks so articulately of the love of God, restricts that love to those within the church, who agree with his way of thinking. People outside these parameters don’t belong and are rejected.

In a recent series of podcasts, American Buddhist teacher and psychologist, Tara Brach speaks of this process of what she calls “bad-othering”. (www.tarabrach.com)

She describes how this can happen within individuals, in our personal relationships and at a societal level. We turn parts of ourselves, or other individuals and groups, into objects. It happens of course between different ethnic groups and nations too.

She stresses the need to move beyond this, to “inclusiveness and reverence for life”. That is a challenge that we all need to take on board.

Can we afford to do otherwise when the results of ignoring it can be not only painful personally, but destructive in our communities, and downright catastrophic internationally?

Which brings me to what is a key word in this passage. A word that points us to a means of sustenance and wisdom as we struggle to live with integrity in our complex world. That puts us in touch with a source of courage and strength as we risk reaching across what divides us from others.

That’s the word “abiding” in verse 24. It’s translated also as “living in union with” or “ in intimate relationship with”.

There seems to be a lovely mutuality about this abiding, between God and the individual. It is also dynamic and empowering.

For those anxious 1st century Christians knowing the presence of God in this way must have encouraged and supported them in their time of difficulty. We also heard that feeling of being cared for and guided in the familiar sentiments of Psalm 23, which we read together, earlier in the service.

And so it can be for us.

That loving accompaniment loosens us a little from our need for certainty and safety. We remain rooted in our intentional focus, and reflective action, but are freer to respond with trust and compassion to the complex world we live in.

At last week’s Spirited Conversation we heard from Katrina Harper about her work with Medecin Sans Frontiers. MSF provide emergency medical care and act as witnesses and advocates in some of the world’s most troubled areas.

 One story that stuck in my mind was of Katrina and her colleagues having to drink many, many cups of tea as discussions were held in the handover to local organisations, at the end of a project.

So today I would like to leave you with a similar image, slightly adapted from the one in verse 5 of the 23rd Psalm.

No longer is the person in the Psalm feasting in splendid isolation, at a laden table in full view of their unfortunate enemies.

Rather a happy tea party is in progress. There are people from all different factions, of all different kinds eating cake and pouring tea for each other. They’re laughing and chatting as they make new connections and prepare to take on the project of creating a better, more peaceful world together.

 May God help us make that dream come true!

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References:

<http://www.explorefaith.org/LentenHomily02.24.02.html> Marcus Borg

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Manser M H, Barratt, D, Lalleman, P J and Steinberg, J (Editors) 2009 “ Critical companion to the Bible: a literary reference” New York Facts on File.

Guthrie D and Motyer J A (Editors) 1970 “New Bible Commentary Revised” London Intervarsity Press