



Wilf Holt
Symbols of Remembering –
the Cross and the Poppy

John 11: 11-18

Easter 4

25 April 2021

Greece.

Some time ago I found myself in southern Thessaly on my way to visit the Monasteries of Meteora – those remarkable monasteries that have settled themselves into the tops of spectacular rocks that soar to the heavens. I was in a small town waiting for a bus having alighted from the Athens train. I realised I had a 4 hour wait (the travel guide had stated 20 min!)

Hefting my backpack, I strolled through the town till I came to a small river. Wandering up a track that followed the river, passing the remains of previous ages I came to a quiet pool. Sitting beside a large rock under a tree I rested in the comparative coolness. No sounds other than the rustling of leaves, the murmur of water flowing over rocks and the odd falling pebble from the cliff walls that surrounded me. A time of peace and some contemplation.

Then in the distance I heard small cascades of pebbles and then a tinkling echoing down the close valley. The tinkling slowly became louder until I could identify its source. The tinkling belonged to a bell that was attached to a large goat that was steadily picking its way along a path in the valley wall. Sedately following came more goats and then a man, dressed in clothing that blended impossibly with the dry grass and rock. Wooden pole in hand he soundlessly moved past me with more goats following. Within minutes all was still and quiet.

They passed as though they had never been.

The image of the shepherd and probably a good one.

Aotearoa.

This morning I sat, not beside a river pool but by a pool of darkness – waiting for dawn. The museum forecourt, murmurs of hushed conversation and a quiet waiting. A time of peace and some contemplation.

Attending a dawn service is something I have done since early childhood. As a young boy I accompanied my father to the local cenotaph where I watched him and many of his friend's march. Later I participated in those marches as a serving member of the armed forces.

For most of the past 60 odd years I was absorbed in the "goings on", of Anzac Day. The wearing of a poppy, the deliberate preparations for the parade, unseen staccato voices giving orders, the hushed reverence of the ceremony and the inevitable journey to the RSA and meeting up with older ex-service people, friends, and family.

And yet over these past 60 odd years some ANZAC Day understandings have begun to change.

The addresses of my father's time, often delivered at dawn, drew heavily on the notion of the Myth of Redemptive violence.

As described by Walter Wink, this myth enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. He believes that this myth is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world and still influences us profoundly.

The natural follow on from this way of thinking allowed us to view the role of the combatant as a saviour figure who laid down his life to ensure we live in peace and freedom.

Allowed us to believe that violence is sanctioned if it is to counter a greater violence or threat of violence.

Over the last few years counter voices are being more strongly heard.

Our history of treating counter voices has been shameful in the least and murderous in its extremity. We called those voices, conscientious objectors and we generally loathed them. The description pacifist is now more accepted today and we seem to be more likely to demonstrate or at least talk about a nonviolent way of being.

I guess that is a little difficult to swallow given the level of violence present in our communities, yet we are more comfortable now to talk about all victims of conflict. We still need to hear the stories of our combatants, to mourn all those who perished in war be they civilian, soldier or those know as enemy.

However, I believe we are more likely want to hear those stories and more likely to question why we as a nation might participate in state sponsored violence or the apparatus of violence.

An example of the slowly growing strength of the counter voice is the adoption of the White Poppy into our Remembrance and ANZAC Day events.

Peace Movement Aotearoa have taken up the initiative created by the United Kingdom's Women's Co-operative Guild in the mid 1930's to symbolise via a white poppy a message of "no more war". The white poppy represents three things: remembrance for all victims of war, commitment to peace and a challenge to the glamorisation of conflict.

Whilst small initiatives like this may grow and nurture more fundamental change, the reality of our history as humans remains.

Its Easter 4 and we are almost through the Easter journey. For much of that journey we have been accompanied by the cross. It has been constantly present; the horror of the cross has been constantly present.

As a Christian it is hard to escape the symbol of the cross.

In this space it is behind me (AND INFRONT OF ME) and beside me.

Crosses have led armies to war and untold numbers of lips have kissed crosses. The cross is a popular form of jewellery.

Without doubt the cross is a most powerful symbol.

Yet we know that without the cross there would be no resurrection. The death associated with the cross is of course only half the story.

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter our gospel shifts from the historical recounting of the events following the resurrection to Christological reflection. The goal is to assist us as we, like Mary and the disciples, seek to understand what happened and is happening to us, the flock of the good shepherd.

The image of the cross recedes

The Good Shepherd:

The "good shepherd" is one of the earliest and most popular images for Jesus. Before the cross became a universal symbol of Christianity, the image of the good shepherd may well have been the most popular image of the early Christians. The cross does not appear in the catacombs below Rome, for example, but Jesus the Good Shepherd does. As far as symbols go the stylised fish can be found in many catacombs – especially in those dated pre 3rd and 4th century.

Some of the earliest images of Jesus found in churches and tombs were not portrayals of Jesus on the cross, or the infant in the manger. Rather, they picture Jesus as the shepherd. And what may be one of the earliest paintings of all is of a very young Jesus, dressed in a short white tunic, who has a draped lamb over his shoulders. The words “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” accompany the painting.

Many of Israel’s former leaders were shepherds and Jesus’s audience would all have known something of the shepherd – would probably have known one.

I suspect that they might not have known one who would have laid down his life for his sheep – and if they did then they certainly did not know one who had the power to take it up again.

The shepherd image is compelling as our gospel today shows, even powerful but not in the manner that the cross is. I can’t recall any army being inspired by the image of a shepherd or the rhetoric of a shepherd.

I struggle to imagine how the example of the good shepherd could inspire anyone to violence or could resonate with any violence.

And yet the most enduring symbol that points to Jesus is still the cross. A cross that represented the most violent death that those who knew Jesus could imagine.

As we follow Jesus’s journey from birth to death, we know how the story ends – we know that in this story the cross is unavoidable. That cross with its powerful image draws us into remembering and remembering lies at the heart of our liturgy, and has done so for many hundreds of years

Take, eat, this is my body
which is given for you;
do this for the remembrance of me.

Drink this, all of you,
for this is my blood of the new covenant
which is shed for you and for all
for the forgiveness of sins;
Whenever you drink it do this for remembrance of me.

The Latin word *rememorari* – the root of our word remembering, means “to be mindful of”.

Being mindful implies that we learn what it means to be a shepherd, what it means to be a member of the flock.

Being mindful also implies that we learn from the violence that we as nations or peoples, have participated in and strive to make it different.

By doing so we acknowledge what people have given or lost.

In remembering victims and veterans of conflict, we can begin the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation not just between nations and peoples but reconciliation between each of us, within ourselves and in our relationship with God.

Our ANZAC remembering then should not stop at simply remembering past actions or events or remembering and honouring all who died.

I dare to imagine that this morning there was no one sitting by me who came to glorify war, to hear rousing speeches or to perpetuate violence against some 'other'.

Most I hope came to continue remembering – remembering the death and violence that humans have inflicted on each other and on this planet.

To continue to remember and honour not just those members of their whanau who served and who are now dead through old age or through the violence of war. But to remember all who experienced the violence of conflict whatever their situation.

To continue to remember not just those whanau who struggled with the aftermath of war and in some cases still do. But to remember all who have struggled with the effects of violence irrespective of faith or political persuasion.

Next year for ANZAC Day I will wear two poppies. One red and one white and between them 2 small medals and a small fish.

Symbols of remembering and of mindfulness.

Amen.