

26 April

Anzac Day commemorations have taken on great significance given that it is the centenary of the landing of Gallipoli. I prefer the word 'commemoration' rather than 'celebration' because there is little to 'celebrate' when human beings kill each other in military conflict. Many historians speak of the brutality and barbarity of World War I. The pope at the time of the First World War, the forgotten pope of the twentieth century Benedict XV, desperately tried to get the warring nations to lay down their arms and to seek the way of peace, making numerous attempts to achieve justice and reconciliation. He was ignored and the world paid a terrible price in terms of bloodshed and loss of life. But as a nation we acknowledge and respect the sacrifices of those who went to war, the giving of their lives, the terrible physical and psychological pain they endured, many families who lost fathers, brothers, husbands and sons and the effect this had on families, local communities, the nation and the world.

In the Gospel on this fourth Sunday of Easter, Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, who places himself at the gate to protect the sheep, who throws himself literally in the way of danger in order that the sheep might live. It is an eminently Easter reference, continuing to unfold for us the paschal mystery of Jesus who went to the cross, who laid down his life for the salvation of the world. On this Anzac Day weekend, believer and non-believer appreciates and truly values the one who lays down their life for others, who faces danger and death, in order to protect others. We admire and respect this courage.

This fourth Sunday of Easter is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday when the Church prays in a particular way for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Despite the many changes in the life of the Church, around the world men and woman are coming forward to give their lives completely in the service of Jesus and the Gospel. And to those who already are shepherds in the Church, Pope Francis reminds them to be good pastors, serving the needs of those who call on them and protecting in particular the broken, the poor, the needy and those who suffer.

In our Christian tradition, we always see Anzac Day through the lens of Easter and the paschal mystery of Jesus. We see death and human suffering transformed, we are drawn to the light in the midst of the darkness, and far from glorifying war, we Christians always seek the way of peace, harmony, justice and reconciliation. Today we continue to pray for peace in the troubled parts of our world, for Australian defence force personnel sent on deployment and for the many chaplains, some my friends and colleagues, who have served with distinction in the Australian Defence Force, providing pastoral care often in the most challenging circumstances. While I have never been asked to be a defence chaplain and would probably never volunteer, I admire immensely my colleagues who have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor, Somalia and the Solomon Islands.

After the resurrection of Jesus, the early Church had this very strong belief that the Good Shepherd would guide them, nurture them and protect them from all danger. It gave them great confidence to undertake the preaching ministry we hear about from the Acts of the Apostles, a preaching ministry of joy, a preaching ministry filled with confidence. They each had this burning desire to be people of good news to those around them. And I think there is just as much need today, perhaps even more, for the followers of Jesus to be people of good news. Across this vast and fortunate continent, many people struggle financially, substance abuse is on the increase as is mental illness, parts of Australia are still in serious drought. Yes, just like in the early Church we are called to continually be witnesses of the God who never ceases to call us out of darkness and into his own wonderful light.