

ANZAC DAY, 2020

Over a century after its inauguration, ANZAC Day is by now a major, well-established national event in two countries, Australia and New Zealand, an event which broadly commemorates all those from those lands who served and died in war and acknowledges with gratitude the contribution they made and the sufferings they endured. The commemoration looks stable at first sight, a regular part of the cultural landscape of both countries - although this year's observance has been greatly disrupted by the global health crisis - but the day has been subject to ongoing shifts and changes in the host societies with the succession of the generations over time.

Today, we are told, ANZAC Day speaks strongly to young people and school children. When I was at school and university all those years ago ANZAC Day was of course a big event but dissenting voices were heard, precisely from the young. One of the plays which I studied at school was "The One Day of the Year" by Alan Seymour. It is compelling theatre which makes some valid points but its analysis of the phenomenon of ANZAC Day itself is miserable. It dismisses the men of ANZAC, at least in Australia, as foul-mouthed, bigoted, drunken oafs. Maybe some of them are but many of the returned servicemen aged in their 40s and 50s when the play came out were, 20 years earlier, then in their late teenage years and 20s, placing their lives on the line and sometimes losing them in such exotic locations as the Kokoda track and North Africa in defence of Australia and against Nazism. The play also dismissed ANZAC Day itself as glorification of war and a festival of militarism.

No one understands more clearly the reality of war and the urgency of avoiding it than do soldiers, sailors and airmen especially those who have actually had the misfortune of fighting in a war. No one wants to see war ended or to get away from it more than they. There would be very few families

ANZAC DAY, 2020

in Australia and New Zealand who have not been affected by this awareness. As a boy I spoke about these matters with my father who fought in the Second World War with Dutch, Australians and Americans in the Dutch East Indies against the Japanese. I also spoke to my father's brother, my uncle Wilfred, who saw action against Italians and Germans in North Africa and again in Greece where he was taken prisoner of war. This a realization that ranges well beyond Australia and New Zealand. The other two countries in our Province, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, both suffered appallingly during the Japanese rampage through those islands and ANZAC forces struggled with the local peoples and the Americans to drive them out.

The horror and fear of war is a universal human characteristic. When St Thomas Aquinas comes to the issue of war in the *Summa Theologiae* he puts his question this way: *Ut bellare semper sit peccatum* – is the waging of war always a sin, always wrong? He argues that war is sometimes allowed and goes on to elaborate a just war theory. But the use of that word *semper*, always, suggests that for Thomas the default position is that war is usually, typically wrong – why? Because war is bad for us.

Actually, ANZAC Day is not chiefly about these abstract questions of the nature of war and whether war is right or wrong and under what circumstances. Rather it is concerned with the concrete and historical issues of why men go to war and how they behave when they get there. For Australia and New Zealand today's act of remembrance is first and foremost a day of national contemplation of the tragedy and poignancy of the war situation which, horrible though it always is, does, like so many other situations of difficulty and desperation and disaster, summon forth the most admirable

ANZAC DAY, 2020

human qualities of courage, fortitude, heroism, true friendship, altruism and, yes, let's face it, charity, the highest form of love.

Without commenting on the justification of the wars that Australia and New Zealand have been drawn into, which varies from war to war, and without idealizing motivations which are often mixed, ANZAC Day celebrates the willingness of thousands of Australian and New Zealand men and women to disrupt their lives and to expose themselves to the risks of death or injury or to dedicate themselves to the care of the distressed and wounded and dying and to do this freely and over an unknown duration of time and for the sake of their homelands.

ANZAC Day honours the attitude and practice of self-sacrifice for the sake of the common good. We need to embrace and encourage that attitude and practice because no civilized society can survive in the long run without it. Modern culture is characterized by an exaggeration of human rights, entitlements and fulfilments, most of them simply made up, an exaggeration which obscures and damages the common good, the well-being of the community as an organic whole. The men and women of ANZAC put their lives at serious risk or actually surrendered their lives so that others might live securely in peace and freedom under their own laws.

They have given us a necessary object lesson. We hope and pray that we will not have to learn their lesson in the cauldron of war or other disaster but there is a kernel of truth embedded in their example that applies to every level of human life. When we Christians hear the phrase 'self-sacrifice' our ears prick up, especially as we have just passed through a period of more intensive consideration of the paschal mystery. There is a profound correlation between the spirit of ANZAC and the spirit of Christ who allowed himself to be put to

ANZAC DAY, 2020

death so that the whole of the human family might have the fulness of life and love in the peace and freedom of God's friendship. Jesus taught us that "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends." Again, Jesus never asks us to do something that he himself was not prepared to do. In our Mass today let us ask God our Father to grant his eternal peace and rest to the personnel of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps who have died in wars and to the people of all nationalities, whether military or civilian, who have died in the same way and who continue to die. Let us thank him for the lesson and encouragement that comes to us through the ANZAC spirit to practice that self-sacrificing charity that saves and heals our world and brings it to peace in Christ.

Christopher Dowd OP

ANZAC Day 2020