

'Going over the top' with Archy Hamilton

Reflections on sacrifice, stoicism and Christian faith at Gallipoli tide

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In 1991 I began teaching theology at United Theological College (UTC) in Sydney. I shared a course with a colleague on Australian History and Culture. My contribution (not being that well versed in the actual history!) was to help students develop some skills in the theological interpretation of our history. One theme that seemed to have been neglected, except perhaps by our poets, was suffering and its impact on our way of life. In this context I gave some lectures on war and focused on the Gallipoli tradition. As part of that venture I always showed the last three minutes of the famous film *Gallipoli* (1981).¹ The story, as we know, centred around two young men in Western Australia who were very good runners, their subsequent enlistment when Australia joined the Great War, their exploits in the army and

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their journey to Gallipoli. The film ends in a gut-wrenching manner when the young soldiers are ordered to advance on the Turkish strongholds in the sure and certain knowledge that they will soon be mowed down by enemy gunfire. The final scenes are frozen as Hamilton (Mark Lee), as part of the third wave of attack, goes over the top of the trenches. Guns are left in the trenches, some go over the top with balls to kick, while Hamilton dispenses with his rifle and decides to run as fast as he can. The scene is frozen as a bullet fells him against the backdrop of the anguished cry of Dunne (Mel Gibson).

On one memorable occasion, at the end of the lecture I asked the students whether they thought Jesus would have gone over the top at the order. Most of the students answered with a definite 'yes, of course'. There were a number of students from the Pacific Islands in the class, however, and they all took an opposing view. To a person they said that Jesus would have disobeyed the order notwithstanding the fact that the consequence of this would have been court martial and execution by their own side. It was an intriguing moment and one that I, and I suspect others in the class, never forgot. These Islander students saw no virtue in obedience to a command that sealed the fate of the soldiers. For these students the end of the film simply confirmed for them a certain fatalism inherent in the Gallipoli spirit. It was not an uncontroversial matter, as you can well imagine. Evidently there are different approaches to heroic sacrifice. It sent me on a trail of inquiry that has proved fascinating if not disturbing in some respects.

Some years later, when I was appointed Director of St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra, my family and I became residents of a Reid church house. I was thrilled about this—not because it was close to town and Commonwealth Park, but more so because it was no more than a five minute walk to the Australian War Memorial. I visited it regularly and always took overseas friends. I had long felt from my early teaching days at UTC that the War Memorial offered a unique insight into the Australian mindset as it had emerged out of Anglo-Saxon roots. In particular, I was intrigued with the War Memorial as an embodiment of stoic virtue and heroic sacrifice. As I reflected on my early life in a country town in the Hunter Valley I remembered the Anzac day marches, important for sure but devoid of much of the hype and fanfare that they acquired many decades later. The sombre note of resoluteness in the face of suffering, and the sacrifice this entailed,

were key elements in otherwise subdued affairs, apart from the memory of the Last Post played by a lone bugler.

It is hard to resist the sense that Gallipoli and the Anzac tradition has, over the ensuing decades, become increasingly focused on national identity. This, together with a good dose of civic religion, has been enlisted to serve the higher claim of the now much revered notion in political circles of 'social cohesion'. In any case, there was one particular aspect that had always caught my attention at the War Memorial and that was the large bronze figure situated in the middle of the *Hall of Valour*—a name remarkably underwhelming for what, by any accounts, presents itself as an excellent contemporary example of an ancient Greek Temple. The bronze figure was larger than life; the face resolute and expressionless looking forward into whatever fate awaited the digger; gun upright by his side, so definitely not battle ready.² The figure embodied those great virtues of the stoic spirit that appeared inscribed underneath the modern frescoes of the representatives of different arms of the armed forces: army, navy, air force, nursing. Words like sacrifice, control, loyalty, courage, resolute, patriotism, comradeship, coolness, endurance, devotion.³ I was alarmed some years later to find the bronze soldier removed to the outer edge of the War Memorial precincts and replaced by the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I always thought that in doing so we had in one bold stroke both concealed and deprived ourselves of one of those critical symbols which interprets our life and shapes our identity. We were left with a somewhat muted stoicism.

The stoic ethic and way of life prizes balance and harmony above all else. It is the default practical philosophy for those of Anglo-Saxon roots. It extols a life that deftly charts a way through the tragic, shameful and brutal elements of life on the planet. As noted by two theologians:

It [stoicism] endures evil, suffering and death with dignity. It refuses to be dragged down by them or to be escapist when faced with them. Stoicism is one of the most admirable ways of handling the negativities of life that has been developed. It is patient, courageous and ultimately resigned, and this gives a sober freedom in relation to shame, which is never allowed to get the upper hand or lead to panic or desperation.⁴

As a way of dealing with pain, suffering and violence it is truly a breathtaking venture. It is espoused as the way to endure the most horrible things

that happen to humans, especially in war. Not surprisingly the stoic spirit places great store in personal heroic sacrifice for a cause. Stoicism is a deeply ingrained trait, habit and orientation of our lives. So much so that we can even fool ourselves into believing it is the natural human disposition. Of course this view needs to be reassessed when we meet people from other cultures who seem to have boundless capacity for celebration and joyfulness in life and an approach to tragedy that Anglo-Saxons might find embarrassing and 'weak'. We are creatures of our own cultural, historical and biological evolutionary patterns. It is hard to jump out of our skins and be otherwise.

The stoic emphasis upon balance and control requires a steady heart, mind and spirit. Above all else one must never be guilty of 'going over the top', as the popular saying goes. 'For "good" people in our civilisation it [stoicism] is perhaps the most attractive alternative to Christianity, especially in its realism about the negative side of life.'⁵ The problem for the stoic disposition is that the exhilarating experiences of joy, thanks and praise are closed off. Stoicism 'avoids the ravages and abyss of shame at the cost of the possibility of joy. His [the stoic's] world is marked by order and imperturbability in face of disorder ... [but] the vision of feasting, dancing and endless praise seems dangerously escapist, threatening his equilibrium.'⁶ These same authors note that it is the attractiveness of the 'sensible stoic spirit' that makes it so dangerous. Such a spirit is 'always threatening to be an inoculation against full faith ... exasperatingly close to the real thing but [it] can never make the breakthrough into overflow, the new ecology of blessing, laughter, mutuality and praise.'⁷

The stoic spirit is all too easily enlisted in the service of national identity formation and associated civic religion, trading on a selective cache of virtues that inculcate obedience to authority and prize self-sacrifice and heroic acts. Ultimately, however:

stoic realism cannot accommodate the resurrection, an event beyond any equilibrium, and it cannot be free in the Spirit, for this is continually leading beyond the boundaries into new suffering and joy.⁸

This was the message of the Apostle Paul. His letters bear testimony to the importance of the stoic tradition of the virtues (e.g. self-control) and their radicalisation by the Gospel. The stoic way of life is indeed a brilliant alternative to Christian faith and it is remarkable how easily it can colonise aspects

of Christianity to serve its purpose. We don't have to look very hard when we observe above the entrance to the *Hall of Valour* at the War Memorial the words, 'They gave their lives,' repeated in an expanded form on the myriad cenotaphs in country towns and cities of Australia: 'No greater love can be had than a person lay down their life for their friends.' The Jesus tradition subsumed into stoicism no less.

Brilliant as far as it goes. But does it, can it go far enough for a full human life? That is a question that ought to haunt us who are overwhelmed by the brutalities of human life on so many fronts and yet in the next breath taken to the heights of joy and exuberant hope in the face of remarkable human feats and acts of compassion. Tears and laughter are defining features of homo sapiens; they are litmus tests for our full humanity; they embody the extremities of life and encompass everything in between. Stoic heroic sacrifice refuses such movement in the human spirit. Of course if, notwithstanding the pressure to remain in control, the human being fails the harmony test, and falls into despair or its opposite—uncontainable joy— this simply bears witness to the irrepressible nature of human life to embrace the whole of life. This is certainly a feature of the powerful Ben Quilty exhibition, *After Afghanistan*, at the War Memorial—perhaps a kind of Trojan Horse inside a stoic encampment!

As we remember Gallipoli one hundred years on, and the many wars that have ravaged the earth and its peoples over the course of the last century, perhaps we need to remind ourselves never to settle for second best with respect to our humanity and our faith. I write these words on Good Friday 2015. Jesus' words from the cross are a haunting reminder of another way: 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do'; 'My God my God why have you forsaken me'; 'Today you shall be with me in paradise'; 'Father into your hands I commend my Spirit'; 'It is finished'. All control, coolness and endurance is in the end relinquished. A full human life is finally offered up to Heaven, awaiting a vindication that lies beyond human capacity or control. It is not an easy path, it does not turn away from the abyss, but nor does it end in despair. Rather it is a way of life that leads into Easter Sunday but only via Holy Saturday. This is, in the words of George Steiner, 'the long day's journey of the Saturday' which belongs to the human journey.⁹ Such a way for the 'people of the Way' does not turn aside from the tragic, nor does it refuse the joy. It is a way beyond stoicism into the fullness of life and hope. A 'digger spirituality' that 'goes over the top' of stoicism.

Endnotes

1. *Gallipoli*, directed by Peter Weir, starring Mel Gibson (Frank Dunne), Marl Lee (Archy Hamilton) and Bill Kerr (Uncle Jack), 1981.
2. Compare, for example, figures of Chinese soldiers who are invariably depicted with guns and bayonets held in attacking mode.
3. Also appearing: decision, candour, curiosity, ancestry, chivalry, independence, resource.
4. See the discussion in Daniel Hardy and David Ford, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise*, London, Darton Longman and Todd, 1984, pp. 94–99, this reference at p. 95.
5. Hardy & Ford, *Jubilate*, p. 95.
6. Hardy & Ford, *Jubilate*, p. 95.
7. Hardy & Ford, *Jubilate*, p. 96.
8. Hardy & Ford, *Jubilate*, p. 96.
9. George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 231.