

Remembering Anzac

The emergency of peace

Andrew Cameron

As we approach the centenary of Australia's most noteworthy, or notorious, involvement in World War One, *St Mark's Remembers*. But—what? What to remember, and how?

In the Second World War, the US psychiatrist J Glenn Gray found himself posted to an after-action intelligence unit, where his task was to debrief soldiers in the minutes or even seconds immediately following battle. The immediacy of these post-action debriefings forces him to lift the taboo on the love some men can have for the chaos and death they have wrought:

Anyone who has watched men on the battlefield at work with artillery, or looked into the eyes of veteran killers fresh from slaughter, or studied the descriptions of bombardiers' feelings while smashing their targets, finds hard to escape the conclusion that there is a delight in destruction. A walk across any battlefield shortly after the guns have fallen silent is convincing enough. A sensitive person is sure to be oppressed by a spirit of evil there, a radical evil which suddenly makes the medieval images of hell and the thousand devils of that imagination

Andrew Cameron is Director of St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra and teaches theological ethics.

believable. This evil appears to surpass mere human malice and to demand explanation in cosmological and religious terms.¹

Gray's memoir, *The Warriors: Reflections of Men in Battle*, remains one of our most poignant and empathetic accounts of the soldier's mind. He catalogues many modes by which men participate in war, but this aspect haunts me the most:

Men who have lived in the zone of combat long enough to be veterans are sometimes possessed by a fury that makes them capable of anything. Blinded by the rage to destroy and supremely careless of consequences, they storm against the enemy until they are either victorious, dead, or utterly exhausted. It is as if they are seized by a demon and are no longer in control of themselves. From the Homeric account of the sacking of Troy to the conquest of Dienbienphu, Western literature is filled with descriptions of soldiers as berserkers and mad destroyers.²

Gray goes on to quote from the diary of Ernst Jünger, who recalls participating in the Great War's last German offensive in the west:

The great moment had come. The curtain of fire lifted from the front trenches. We stood up.

With a mixture of feelings, evoked by bloodthirstiness, rage, and intoxication, we moved in step, ponderously but irresistibly toward the enemy lines. I was well ahead of the company ... My right hand embraced the shaft of my pistol, my left a riding stick of bamboo cane. I was boiling with a mad rage, which had taken hold of me and all the others in an incomprehensible fashion. The overwhelming wish to kill gave wings to my feet. Rage pressed bitter tears from my eyes.

The monstrous desire for annihilation, which hovered over the battlefield, thickened the brains of the men and submerged them in a red fog. We called to each other in sobs and stammered disconnected sentences. A neutral observer might have perhaps believed that we were seized by an excess of happiness.³

I am reminded of the comment later in the New Testament, that in the 'last days' humanity would appear 'inhuman,' 'implacable' and 'brutal' (2 Timothy 3:3). To say so risks offending the memory of the soldiers caught up in war. But these adjectives apply more to political and military elites who, coolly removed from the field of battle, rely upon the spirit that makes destruction and set the conditions for everything ranging from the organised suicides of dozens at the The Nek to the deliberate and calculated deaths of millions in the Verdun 'meat grinder'.

Of course, Gray also witnessed the wartime realities of profound comradeship and sacrifice. But these are small morsels to distil from the mire of war. Gray saw enough to write ambivalently of our propensity to valorise these, as if they suffice to offset the wartime abominations he saw everywhere. Similarly, in Karl Barth's erudite treatment of the morality of war, notions such as honour, justice, freedom, the greatness of nations or the expression of supreme human values no longer suffice to camouflage warfare.⁴ 'Political mysticism, of course, is still to be found; but it is now much more difficult to believe in it sincerely. Certain fog patches have lifted.'⁵ Barth points to what today attracts increasing scrutiny as the manifold *moral injury* perpetuated by war:

Does not war demand that almost everything that God has forbidden be done on a broad front? To kill effectively ... must not those who wage war steal, rob, commit arson, lie, deceive, slander, and unfortunately to a large extent fornicate, not to speak of the almost inevitable repression of all the finer and weightier forms of obedience? And how can they believe and pray when at the climax of this whole world of dubious action it is a brutal matter of killing? It may be true that ... an inner strength may become for [a soldier] a more strong and genuine because a more tested possession. But it is certainly not true that people become better in war. The fact is that war is for most people a trial for which they are no match, and from the consequences of which they can never recover.⁶

For Barth, those who follow two world wars face the reality of war with no optimistic illusions. Barth did reject absolute pacifism—even if pacifism has 'almost infinite arguments in its favour'—since sometimes, very occasionally, the cause for a just war may be discerned.⁷ But the first and prime thing to

be remembered is the unutterable abomination of war, all the more when we 'at last soberly admit' modern weaponry's almost incalculable power of obliteration. 'How unequivocally ugly war now is!'⁸

In his Reith Lectures on the history of warfare, the eminent military historian John Keegan describes war as 'a protean activity' that 'changes form, often unpredictably.'⁹ We may well never see another war on the scale of the Great War, and it is a well-observed fact that in the new millennium modern enemies now deploy highly asymmetrical strategies. It also remains a conundrum and a frustration to discern what motivates these new adversaries, and how we might find peace with them. Keegan goes so far as to propose a new and non-traditional kind of disarmament:

The mass-produced assault rifle, costing one-millionth of the jet fighter's price, is ... an almost universal scourge. Many of the fifty million dead of the wars of [the twentieth] century's second half have been killed by the cheap assault rifle. Its high rate of fire makes it deadly against the many in the hands of an individual, while its lightness and simplicity allow even untrained children—who figure increasingly frequently in the ranks of unofficial armies—to kill with a profligacy the veteran of the past could not achieve.

So abundant and so cheap are cheap weapons that I believe we ought now to consider, as a matter of urgency, whether the next initiative in the international disarmament endeavour should not be that of restricting their distribution and eventually their production.¹⁰

But the main obstruction to peace turns out, shockingly, to be that this flood of small arms comes not from shady gunrunners, but from high-level actors who ruthlessly *exploit* the political discontent of their markets. 'It is not true that the trade in cheap arms is a private commercial enterprise. Most cheap weapons have been released into the market by governments, often for political rather than commercial reasons.'¹¹

In response we may feebly mumble the words of the old Anglican Collect, that God might 'banish the spirit that makes for war.' But that seems so impossibly unlikely. To scratch our souls, it seems, is to find that spirit. In his epic *City of God*, Augustine's biggest target is not the hapless

soldier, caught up in the lust of battle. It is the rulers of Rome, who become *dominandi libido dominatur*, ‘mastered by’ their own ‘lust for mastery’. In this early attack on the spirit that makes for war, Augustine simply observes what now goes by the name of political realism: that states simply amass influence.¹² To ‘banish the spirit that makes for war’ would seem to involve the eradication of something alloyed into the base metal of human experience, whether on the battlefield or far from it.

Barth therefore notices the wellspring of war that erupts well upstream from pacifists’ cries for disarmament, or from militarists’ calls for the ‘safety’ of armament. Any Christian can join in with either kind of cry: ‘it requires no great faith, insight or courage’ to radically condemn war: everyone agrees with that, except the odd general or arms dealer. It is equally easy to ‘howl with the wolves’ that states need to make preparations for the loss of peace.¹³

Both of these stances miss that the fabric of political and civil society can itself be inexorably primed for war, through practices and narratives of competition, scarcity, anxiety and threat. ‘It is when interest-bearing capital rather than [humanity] is the object whose maintenance and increase are the meaning and goal of the political order that the mechanism is already set going which one day will send men to kill and be killed.’¹⁴ ‘[T]he real issue in war [is] the economic power which in war is shown not so much to be possessed by man as to possess him, and this to his ruin, since instead of helping him to live and let live it forces him to kill and be killed.’¹⁵

If we accept Richard Denniss’s recent exposé of the power of dodgy economic modelling in our polity, then Australia is well and truly enmeshed in practices and narratives of competition, scarcity, anxiety and threat. It isn’t that Denniss is anti-economics. ‘There is a role for economists, and economic modelling, in public debate. Its role should not be to limit the menu of democratic choices. Instead it should be to help explain the trade-offs.’¹⁶ But Denniss believes that the current practices of economic modelling disclose an incapacity to engage in serious democratic discussion about what actually makes our lives together worth living—the things that make for peace, as it were. According to Barth, the real task a very long way upstream of war (and upstream of the melancholy calculus of what might constitute a just war) is ‘the restoration of an order of life which is meaningful and just.’¹⁷

What does require Christian faith, insight and courage—and the Christian church and Christian ethics are there to show

them—is to tell nations and governments that peace is the real emergency to which all our time, powers and ability must be devoted ... so that no refuge need be sought in war, nor need there be expected from it what peace has denied.¹⁸

This edition of *St Mark's Review* commits the task of remembrance to both theologians and historians, whose professional arts of remembrance discipline us to close attention and rigorous care. For most of us, remembrance depends upon a smattering of books, documentaries and movies about war, and we are in no way sure how to proceed. The bloody landing at Gallipoli, festering mud of Ypres or Passchendaele, the first tanks at Cambrai, the revolting injuries ... what are these to us?

These and a thousand other vignettes remind us when it no longer became possible to camouflage war in 'political mysticism.' That much has been clear throughout the twentieth century. We also owe to them the welcome, if always fragile, drift back to an expectation of more measurably just conditions for war, and rules of engagement in war, in some Western democracies.

But St Mark's will also remember by renewing our commitment to public theology—that tiny, fragile and muddling voice from the Church and by the churches, which seeks for 'an order of life which is meaningful and just.' Peace remains the real 'emergency' to which we are called, by the One who suffered for and with humanity in order to bring peace with God and with one another. Barth's discussion also touches upon the mockery and hostility that Christians inevitably receive when we resist and continue to resist recourse to war. We do so not only because Christ showed the way of peace. We do so because His resurrected life enables us to outlive and outlast the predictable mockeries of His kind of Kingdom.

Endnotes

1. J Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, Harper and Row, New York, 1970, p. 51.
2. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 51.
3. Ernst Jünger, quoted in Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 52.
4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 3: The Doctrine of Creation (Part 4)*, Trans. GW Bromily, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1961, pp. 450–70. I will

generally retain his masculine pronouns for ‘humans’ and ‘humanity,’ given the predominantly masculine nature of the battlefield.

5. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 451.
6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 454.
7. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 455.
8. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 453.
9. John Keegan, *War and Our World*, New York, Vintage Books, 1998, p. 72.
10. Keegan, *War and Our World*, p. 69.
11. Keegan, *War and Our World*, p. 69.
12. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. RW Dyson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 3, 632 (I.pref. & XIV.28).
13. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 459.
14. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 459.
15. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 452.
16. Richard Denniss, ‘Spreadsheets of Power: how economic modelling is used to circumvent democracy and shut down debate,’ *The Monthly*, No. 110, April 2015, pp. 28–33, at p. 33.
17. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 459.
18. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 459.