

“An Anzac Sermon”, a sermon based on Micah 4:1-5 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on 24 April, 2016.

Tomorrow, Anzac Day, is perhaps New Zealand’s most religious day, an opportunity to reflect on our present as well as our past, to examine our own peaceful and violent tendencies.

I am only one generation from World War II. It wove through my childhood in the stories my father and mother told, the objects we had at home, the photos we viewed, the friends that visited, the regular voicing of Pacific names – New Caledonia, Guadalcanal, Nissan Island, Vella Lavella.

Not long ago I stayed on Vella Lavella, a rarely visited island in the Solomons. In 1943 after fierce fighting, the Japanese were pushed off the north of the island. In the seventy years since, bush had grown over the remnants of war.

Crumbling bunkers. Dissolving dug-outs. Concrete pads where once barracks stood. Broken pots and pans. Rusting cases. Bullet shells. A bombed harbour. Rotting buildings. Most impressive of all - a long airstrip through the cracks of which, even 70 years later, small trees were just beginning to grow. And aircraft bays set into hills. It had been a US air force base with thousands of New Zealanders and Americans.

This was where my father had lived for over a year. Mosquito ridden. Drippingly humid. Intensely hot. Frequently wet. Densely bushed. Steeply hilled. Isolated. And at night, without any lights, very dark. A place for fear and risk. Locals confirmed to me stories I thought my father had made up. Of the air force bombing a bay because an airman had been killed by a crocodile.

Even in our distant land, war is not far away. In my life, war and the impact of war have been unavoidably close - pressing in their questions.

Wars question me, us, Aotearoa.

I visited Dachau Concentration Camp with a Jewish woman whose forbears had been murdered there.

In it are these memorable words –

May the example of those who were exterminated here between 1933 and 1945 because they resisted Nazism help to unite the living for the defence of peace and freedom and in respect for their fellow man.

And in another place simply the words – Never Again. But it's complicated.

Some political scientists have been exploring the dynamic of authoritarianism. Karen Stenner - the Authoritarian Dynamic – suggests there is a certain subset of people who hold latent authoritarian tendencies. These tendencies can be triggered or "activated" by the perception of physical threats or by destabilising social change, leading those people to desire policies and leaders that we might call authoritarian.

It is as if, as Jonathan Haidt has written, a button is pushed that says, "In case of moral threat, lock down the borders, kick out those who are different, and punish those who are morally deviant."

Authoritarians prioritise social order and hierarchies, which bring a sense of control to a chaotic world. Challenges to that order — diversity, an influx of outsiders, breakdown of the old order — are experienced as personally threatening because they risk upending the status quo they equate with basic security.

This is a time of social and cultural change in many nations. The old polarities don't explain as much as they did. Some people are becoming afraid.

When they face physical threats or threats to the status quo, authoritarians support policies that seem to offer protection against those fears. They favour forceful, decisive action against things they perceive as threats. And they flock to political leaders who they believe will bring this action.

Stanley Feldman suggested authoritarianism is a personality profile - he wanted to be able to predict those tendencies. He settled on something as ordinary as parenting goals and four simple questions to reveal how highly people value hierarchy, order, and conformity over other values.

"Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: independence or respect for elders, obedience or self-reliance, to be considerate or to be well-behaved, curiosity or good manners?"

Scarily, non-authoritarians become authoritarians as the sense of threat grows.

How different is the vision held out by religion.

One of the great religious leaders of our day is Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Britain.

“We need people of all faiths to express their active opposition to terror in the name of God. It was Machiavelli not Mohammed who said that it is better to be feared than to be loved. It was Nietzsche, the atheist, who saw life as the will to power. No genuine religion ever needed violence to prove its beauty, or terror to establish its truth. This is not faith but sacrilege.”

Jonathan Sacks notes that human beings need a sense of identity. 20th century attempts at establishing identity had shocking results. The holocaust - a result of using race as a basis for identity. The millions who died in the Soviet Union - a result of using ideology as a basis of identity. World War II - a result of using nation states as a basis of identity. Today, says Sacks, religious identities are roaring back, and it's not always good news. They are good news only if they make room for the other.

Sacks highlights how religion offers a freedom, human categorising can't. When we seek to gain identity from a God who is for all, over all, in all, in whose image we are all made, we depend less on identities drawn from difference - race, ideology, nationality.

It's highlighted in Micah 4.

In verse one, the prophet paints an image of lofty heights and tranquil calm above the noise of the present condition of Judah's transgressions. He talks of the universal centrality of God's peace. The word "mountain" in Hebrew (har) is used symbolically to indicate a great world power. The word "hill" in Hebrew (gib'ah) is used to indicate a smaller world power. The kingdom of the Creator of the Universe is more powerful than any other kingdom in the world, even the greatest world power. Thus, when we come together to worship this Creator, it lifts our minds and hearts above the mundane focuses of our small world-views, above our more limited identities, to who we are together in God. It makes room for the other person as made in the image of God.

In verse two, peace is experienced through relational power. Micah describes a need for the people to gather together. God's peace will be universal in its influence, but there must be a flow or movement of the people to come together in relationship so that they are empowered. Peace comes from being with the other, that then translates into engaging the other.

In verse three, there is evidence of peace through transition and transformation. Transformation comes from changing weapons into positive working tools (swords become ploughshares). It takes an open heart to change, and it takes an open mind to act on the change. Changing ammunition that divides to alliances that unite, identities that divide to identities that unite. Peace comes from working with the other.

In verse four, peace comes through the assurance of safety and security, through God's declaration of peace. This safety and security is far from that of the authoritarian.

One of war's greatest antidotes is a community of people who know the identity they share with all humanity comes from a higher realm, from a God who is for all, over all and in all; a community of people who know their security and safety is found in this God and who thus resist authoritarianism in all its forms. May it be so for us.

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