

“Got your back”, a sermon based on John 10: 11 -1 8 preached on 26 April 2015 at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright, minister at Knox.

This sermon uses material from a sermon to be preached by the Rev. Dr Allan Davidson at St Luke’s Presbyterian, Remuera, Auckland, on the same day. Some sections have been altered. The sermon can be accessed on the St Luke’s website.

I grew up in a home where the two largest and most imposing books were two volumes of photographs of World War One. They were called a pictorial history. They sat in a special place in the front room and it was expected we would treat them with great care.

Here they are ...

When I was allowed to open them, I saw a world beyond anything I knew: bodies of men lying where they had been killed; landscapes of unrelenting mud; trees but stark, battered trunks; ships sinking; bodies floating; horses pulling artillery through that unrelenting mud.

My father had fought in the Pacific during World War 2 and he was secretary of the RSA Club. But when I knew him, he never went to an Anzac Day event. I would go off as a cub or scout or prefect, and when I asked him, he said, briefly, I want nothing to do with the glorification of war. At other times he spoke of the trivialising of war. The two seemed the same to him. He came away from the war with no time for some allies and a lot of time for some friends.

Feelings run deep about Anzac. We get nervous about the language, and when Anzac and sacrifice and heroism and duty are talked about by leaders we wonder if we are being used again, softened up for the next cause.

We have always struggled to get the balance right.

Let me use words from the Rev. Dr Allan Davidson, a Presbyterian historian in Auckland, who is preaching this morning at St Luke’s in Auckland.

“The 25th April 1915, one hundred years ago was a Sunday. For Presbyterians, Sunday was “the Lord’s Day”, a day of rest. Ironically, on that Sunday the ANZAC troops invaded Gallipoli. A medical officer dealing with the wounded said, “A more hellish Sunday one could not conceive.”^[1]

“Mark Sheftall, in *Altered Memories of the Great War*, contrasts the British post-war perspective with that adopted in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. He typifies the British attitude by quoting Siegfried Sassoon’s reaction in 1928 to the New Menin Gate, “commemorating the 54,000 British soldiers missing and presumed dead” in the Ypres salient:

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,
The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,
These doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones.^[2]

“Sheftall calls this “a narrative of disenchantment”. Different from the way authors in Australia, New Zealand and Canada “generally celebrated the character and achievements of the nation’s soldiers with obvious pride.” Despite the terrible costs in death and injured “Dominion soldiers were celebrated as paragons of a particular kind of masculine martial ideal”.^[3] Defeat was often turned into an heroic epic.

Allan Davidson continues –

“What I described as “war rhetoric” was created in New Zealand before the troops left for overseas, putting in place an understanding of the conflict which enabled people to cope with the huge casualty lists and the terrible suffering produced by war. Church leaders played a significant role in shaping that war rhetoric which crowded out dissent and criticism.

“While churches denounced war as evil, they saw the British Empire as joining in a good cause, even a righteous cause. On that very same 25 April 1915, Dr James Gibb, the leading Presbyterian minister in the country, declared: “It was the urgent duty of all men of age and physically fit to offer themselves at once to their country, and it was the duty of all women to surrender their men—nay, to bring pressure to bear on them to do duty to the flag.”^[4] Gibb, like many other clergy, using their pulpits, acted as recruiting sergeants for the army. Three times he mentions the word “duty”.

“This patriotic duty was seen as being blessed by God. William Grant was a Presbyterian chaplain. He wrote from Gallipoli to the *Poverty Bay Herald* in August 1915, sympathising with the relatives whose sons were killed or wounded after the huge casualties suffered by New Zealander soldiers at Chunuk Bair. He wrote: “May the God of Battles, who is undoubtedly fighting with and for us in this world-wide struggle, comfort and succour them in the hour of trial.”^[5]

“In making sense of the suffering brought by war, the church freely employed sacrificial language with connotations associated with the life of Jesus. Grant applauded the mothers who had given their sons “to the Empire at the cost of sacrificial pain.”^[8]

“Like other chaplains, Grant buried the dead and wrote letters of consolation to their families. The following are some extracts:

Your boy has paid the full price of the patriot....

Your gallant son has given his life for the liberties of the world.

You may well be proud, in your grief, that your boy found death fighting in defence of the Empire, and in a sense the liberties of humanity.^[10]

“Chaplains were confronted with death in war as much as anyone. The sanctifying of sacrifice was used to describe what one Gallipoli chaplain described as “slaughter” and a Gallipoli veteran called “sheer lunacy”.

“Army chaplains and clergy in New Zealand used language about God, duty, sacrifice and Empire to justify the war.

“One hundred years later what have we learnt from our involvement in war? We know the horrific costs it placed on individuals, families and society. We honour and admire the courage and commitment of those who went. We remember the dead, the injured and the casualties who carried the war with them physically or psychologically for the rest of their lives. But as a nation and as a world how far have we unlearnt the ways of war and learnt the ways of peace?

“There are those brave individuals who have shown us another way which is costly and requires guts. James Gibb, who was so enthusiastic about the war, was deeply troubled by the deaths of his Bible Class boys and the punitive Treaty of Versailles. He became a Pacifist, devoting his energies to the League of Nations as a vehicle for peace.

“Morton Ryburn served overseas from 1915-1919, became a famous progressive missionary educationalist in India, and a Pacifist.

“Ormond Burton was Morton Ryburn’s brother-in-law. Having served throughout the whole of the First World War, Ormond Burton unlearned the ways of war. At great cost to himself and to his family he committed himself to the ways of peace and Christian pacifism. During the Second World War he spent nearly three years in prison because of his outspoken denunciation of war. He was dismissed from the ministry of the Methodist Church because he refused to accept the church’s ruling that its ministers could not use its pulpits to speak against the war.

“His criticism of the role of the church in the First World War was devastating. The church, he wrote, “was subservient everywhere to the national governments. All over the world Christian ministers closed their New Testaments, preached more paganism and became the recruiting sergeants of the armies.” This was said with some justification.”

I spoke earlier of my father. He would go to reunions and sometimes colleagues from the war would visit him. There was ease; there was laughter. They had spent four years together, at risk. A few years ago, I spent some days on the island of Vella Lavella in the Solomon Islands. My father was there for about two years, along with thousands of New Zealanders, Australians and Americans, during a significant time. What struck me was its remoteness. And how inhospitable – dense jungle, steep hills, biting insects, hot and humid weather, surrounded by water, easily accessible by the enemy army.

As I have listened to former soldiers speak, I have been struck by their camaraderie, the relaxed yet trusting nature of their relationships. They put their lives into each other’s hands. They needed each other when life was at stake. I saw that with my father and his friends, the idea “We’ve got your back”. You can risk your life, and we will look after you.

That is the image John presents of Jesus, who says to his disciples – “I’ve got your back.” I will do my best to ensure you are kept safe with God. That’s what it means to be a shepherd community, to be a community where people take risks in love, knowing there are others who will look after them, who keep their backs.

Humankind often feels it needs to give meaning to death, especially tragic, horrific, large scale, and seemingly pointless death. To do so, we develop myths, and we use elevated language, language that sounds religious – duty, spirit, legend, sacrifice. The Christian faith sensitises us to such language – to ascribing qualities to war and to ourselves we can only use of God or of Jesus or of the Spirit. The more our language takes us from lived experience, the more it becomes propaganda. Without the elevated language, we have the opportunity to learn more about how to be human, about qualities as important yet basic as keeping each other safe in order to risk life.