

Anzac Day

25th April 2017

Westminster Abbey

The Dean

What does ANZAC Day mean to us? What should it mean?

Here at Westminster Abbey, the tradition of holding a parade and service on 25th April to commemorate the landings at Gallipoli began the first year after the landings, within a few months of the successful silent retreat from the Dardanelles peninsula. The tradition became firmly established and over many decades Australians and New Zealanders have gathered here at the Abbey on this day. Six years ago, ANZAC Day fell the day after Easter Sunday, in the week in which the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge were to be married here. But our ANZAC Day service still held its traditional place within the Abbey's busy calendar.

Over the 102 years since the first landings, however, the meaning of ANZAC Day has changed and developed.

In the early years, the predominant mood was one of celebration of a kind, and of commemoration. So many young men from New Zealand and Australia had lost their lives at Gallipoli, in their first engagement during the Great War. The numbers of people killed horrify us still. Among the dead were 44,000 men from France and the British Empire, including 2779 New Zealanders and 8700 Australians. 87,000 Turks lost their lives. The allies suffered 142,000 casualties and the Ottoman Empire 251,000. And the commemoration celebrated much bravery and determination.

In August 1915, a series of offensives against Turkish positions along the Gallipoli front was planned to break the stalemate.

On 6th August, at Lone Pine, the men of the Australian 1st Division made a successful assault on the central stronghold of the whole Turkish line, aiming to capture its forward trenches. Dozens of small-scale actions were fought on 7th, 8th and 9th August to prevent the Turkish troops from forcing the Australians out of their recently acquired positions. For the ANZACs, the action revolved around holding on to half a dozen barriers erected during the attacking phase on 6th August and the network of Turkish trenches seized at that time. This was the battle context for the award to seven Australians during this period of the Victoria Cross.

On 7th August, the New Zealand Infantry Brigade attacked Chunuk Bair, a prominent hill overlooking the battlefield. The battle lasted for three days, with Chunuk Bair captured by the brigade's Wellington Infantry Battalion on the second day, during which Corporal Cyril Bassett, a signaller in command of a section of five other signallers of his unit, laid down and maintained essential telephone lines between brigade headquarters and the front lines. He braved continuous gunfire during this time. Two bullets passed through the fabric of his tunic, though he was not wounded. After the battle, he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Altogether, 39 VCs were awarded at Gallipoli for valour.

In the early years, the commemorations of ANZAC Day were vivid and, for many, sad memorials of those they had loved and lost. In this country, the last veterans of the First World War died in 2009: William Stone in January that year and both Henry Allingham and Harry Patch in July 2009. The passing of the World War I generation was marked on Armistice Day 2009 with a special service here at Westminster Abbey

during which Her Majesty The Queen laid a wreath at the Grave of the Unknown Warrior, to commemorate all the fallen allied troops.

So, whilst we continue to give thanks for the courage, bravery and sacrifice of those who served and gave their lives at Gallipoli, the nature of our commemoration has broadened. Now we remember all those who suffered during the Great War and in subsequent wars. In many brutal and bitter conflicts, and in many defensive actions, men and women in the armed forces of Australia and New Zealand have served with those of the United Kingdom and the other nations of the Commonwealth with our allies.

On ANZAC Day, we commemorate those New Zealanders and Australians who served in the many conflicts of the 20th century and in more recent years and those who lost their lives. And we remember with gratitude those who serve today and are willing to give their lives in the cause of justice, peace and freedom.

Another theme of the commemorations over the 102 years has been nationhood. The Gallipoli campaign marked the first occasion when the new Dominions of Australia and New Zealand, each founded out of a collection of separate colonies, and each achieving self-governing status early in the 20th century, had been seen to act as nations in their own right. They were part of the imperial and allied effort, serving alongside soldiers from the United Kingdom, from India, from Newfoundland and from France, but they were separate nations acting together, in the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, every soldier an ANZAC.

With nationhood goes a sense of pride in the achievement, pride in service offered with others in a cause judged to be worthy, pride in sacrifice for justice and peace, pride in playing a significant part in an

international cause, pride too in the ties that bind us. These themes predominate now.

Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have all evolved dramatically in the past fifty years as people have moved far more freely around the world in the search for better living conditions and more rewarding employment. In this country certainly that has been more noticeable in the years since the Second World War. But in truth, people have moved backwards and forwards between our countries and within and beyond the Commonwealth since the 19th century and before then; our new-found diversity is no innovation but evolution and enrichment. The ties that bind us are and must be as strong as ever.

The First World War, indeed both World Wars, and other conflicts, offered our nations terrible trials and particular tests. Together, the people we remember today rose to the challenges and achieved a resolution of the conflicts that not only achieved a new peace but also led to the reconciliation of former enemies and a new world order in which justice, peace and freedom could flourish. The presence of the Turkish flag and ambassador speak powerfully of reconciliation.

But we face new tests today, global tests, with terrorism and violence breaking out in new and unpredicted ways, and with dramatic changes to the world order that seem troubling whilst offering opportunity. How shall we respond? Once again, as 102 years ago, my prayer and hope is that the ties that bind us will enable our nations to respond together in a renewed relationship of collaboration and confidence, creating peace and stability in our troubled world, and justice with freedom. The challenge may not as obvious as it was 102 years ago but it is no less real.

The reading from St John's Gospel we heard just now assures us of hope in the darkest and most troubling circumstances. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled,' says Jesus. 'Believe in God, believe also in me.' When doubting Thomas questions what Jesus means by saying there are many dwelling places in his Father's house, our Lord insists that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the way to the Father in heaven, the way to new and eternal life. His resurrection after a painful and bitter death opens for all who believe and trust in him a way to God the Father, a way to eternal life in Christ. Death cannot defeat us. Easter joy! And in darkness light, in despair hope!