

Anzac Day
25th April 2016
Westminster Abbey
The Dean

A hundred years ago today, thousands of Australian and New Zealand troops, veterans of the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps, marched through London, providing a spectacle observed with patriotic pride by what seem to have been hundreds of thousands of Londoners. The photographs and cinematic images from the time appear to show impenetrable crowds up close to the marching troops. King George V, with Queen Mary, came here to Westminster Abbey to mark the first Anzac Day. The Abbey would have been as full as it is today a hundred years later.

This was of course a solemn commemoration of the dead, of the Australians and the New Zealanders, who had died at Gallipoli with their Indian, French and British allies, 46,000 in all. The Kiwi trooper Jack Linton had mentioned this in a letter home to his mother, after the allied withdrawal from the Dardanelles: 'My goodness, Mother, how it did go to our hearts—after all we had gone through—how we had slaved and fought—fought and slaved again—and then to think that we had been sizzled in the heat, tortured by flies and thirst, and later nearly frozen to death. It was hard to be told we must give it up. But it was not our wasted energy and sweat that really grieved us. In our hearts it was to know we were leaving our dead comrades behind. That was what every man had in his mind.' But as today, in our service of commemoration and thanksgiving, there was another aspect to the parade, one of thanksgiving, even of celebration. This could simply be thanksgiving that

the terrible ordeal was over and that many thousands of lives had not been lost. But there was more. There were successes to celebrate.

Whilst the naval attack that preceded the first troop landings had been abandoned, it had in fact very nearly succeeded. And whilst the assault on Gallipoli had been badly planned and woefully executed, leaving the imperial troops in the most perilous and precarious circumstances, yet when the decision had been taken in the autumn of 1915 to abandon the attack and evacuate the troops, the process of withdrawal had been handled perfectly secretly and safely.

A successful retreat was only part of the story of the celebration that took place in London a hundred years ago today. From the point of view of the Londoners who came out on to the streets, there was a strong sense of the sentimental links, the ties of kinship and common history and friendship that bound the people of the United Kingdom and the people of New Zealand and Australia. These ties of friendship still bind us, and surely shall bind us for the future.

For the Anzac troops and for the people at home whom they represented, there was another significant cause for thanksgiving. Australia and New Zealand were new countries. The Commonwealth of Australia had only come together from a group of separate colonies as a self-governing dominion within the British Empire in 1901, and New Zealand in 1907. A hundred years ago today, an editorial in the Sydney Morning Herald put it like this, 'Today we celebrate the first anniversary – not so much the birth of a nation as the coming of age of our people in the riper period of full nationhood. Anzac Day will go down in posterity as the day in which Australia cast on one side the ideas and ideals of adolescence and assumed the more serious responsibilities of man's estate.'

Coupled with this was the spirit of Anzac, which would in time embrace any Australian or New Zealander who had fought or served in the First World War or the Second World War, and which has been described as recognising 'the qualities of courage, mateship and sacrifice which were demonstrated at the Gallipoli landing.'

So today: we commemorate the Australian and New Zealand dead, not just of Gallipoli, but of the international conflicts of the past hundred years; we celebrate the courage, mateship and sacrifice of those who have been willing to commit, and if necessary offer, their lives in the service of others, in the high cause of freedom and honour; and we give thanks for our common history and the ties that bind us.

The first dawn service in Sydney was held at the Cenotaph nearby the General Post Office, where volunteers had enlisted and where news for anxious families would arrive. The pattern of a dawn service at Gallipoli and elsewhere has now been long established, as here in London at the memorials at Hyde Park Corner. The dawn service marks that moment when fearful anticipation turned into the horror and loss of life of the first attacks of a new battle.

Most of us are thankful never to have experienced going into battle, facing the real and almost tangible prospect of killing or being killed, of impending death. And we have little or nothing in our experience to go on if we try to imagine ourselves in that position. Most of us have seen news footage of battles, and cinematic representations of close combat. But these images, just like still photographs, must fail to tell us what is going on inside the heads and hearts of people in those circumstances. Sometimes I have the privilege of talking to the surviving veterans of the Battle of Britain, the once young, courageous pilots who, flying Spitfires and Hurricanes in 1940, saved our nation from invasion. Despite their

bravery, there was fear; perhaps without fear, there could have been no bravery. A walk in the park does not require courage. But we have few contemporary records of people facing death, as they await the start of a battle, in the moments before dawn.

One record we have from two thousand years ago. A man facing death prayed, we are told in an agony of bloody sweat, 'Father, let this cup pass me by.' Three times he prayed, but added 'But thy will not mine be done.' The death of Jesus on the cross was no walk in the park but agonising, slow, and bitter; he was burdened with a sense of loss and even of failure. Many a soldier during these past two thousand years, and I dare say many amongst the Anzacs, has been given comfort and strength by knowing the presence and companionship of Jesus Christ. Here, day by day through the year, we celebrate his identity with human beings in our trials and sufferings, the identity of God with us in Christ. We give thanks too in this Easter season for his glorious resurrection from the dead. His rising to new life holds out to us the hope of new life, eternal life with him in heaven, for all who trust in him.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died and was raised from death to save the whole world from sin and death, to bring new life to all. Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.'

May our prayer then also this day be that the whole people of our world can come together in peace and harmony, in the high cause of freedom and justice!