



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

ANZAC — the other side of the story

Clay Nelson © 28 April 2019

Last Sunday we focused on the Easter Story. This Sunday we focus on the ANZAC story. You can be forgiven if you are experiencing spiritual whiplash, for they are oppositional narratives. While I'm sure it is only coincidence that they are juxtaposed so closely to each other, it is a helpful reminder of our human condition and our predilection for redemptive violence. For one is a white poppy story and the other a red poppy one.

When I first came to New Zealand I was struck by how attached every hamlet, village, town and city was to Gallipoli and red poppies. Each had a cenotaph listing its dead from the carnage of that ill-fated folly as well as all those who served, were wounded or died in that most useless, and wasteful of wars. Many of the churches I visited were no less obsessed, having stained glass windows and plaques dedicated to the grim fruits of war, often featuring a quote from the Gospel of John attributed to Jesus, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

So, it may be a surprise to you that during the first thousand years of Christianity Christians did not focus on the crucifixion at all. There are no images of his suffering and death in early churches. Unitarian scholars Rebecca Parker and Rita Brock couldn't believe it either. They thought the core belief of Christianity rested on the belief that Jesus Christ died to save the world from our sins. What they discovered in studying Christian art of the period is that Jesus' followers focused on creating paradise on earth now, not in some after life. They saw paradise as a world where each of us is a son of god created to bring love more fully into the world. They envisioned a peaceable kingdom where all were accepted and cared for in a loving community. Jesus's teachings and the practices of the early church affirmed life in this world as the place of salvation. Within their church communities, Christians in the first millennium sought to help life flourish in the face of imperial power, violence, and death. This was definitely a white poppy religion.

Now fast forward about a thousand years. Christianity's acceptance as a state-sponsored religion in the 4th century had begun to eat away at its original vision. The state was now the Holy Roman Empire. Charlemagne was emperor and in Christian art the first depiction of the crucifixion appeared. It still exists in a side chapel in Cologne's cathedral. It is the Gero cross which portrays a life-size portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion in all of its ghastliness. It is carved from a Saxon oak by descendants of the Saxons who were baptized against their will by Charlemagne during a three-decade campaign of terror. Charlemagne's armies slaughtered all who resisted, destroyed shrines representing the Saxons' tree of life, and deported 10,000 Saxons from their land. Pressed by violence into Christian obedience, the Saxons produced art that bore the marks of their baptism in blood.

By the 11th century crucifixions in Christian art were all the rage, the more horrific the better. Saints became co-sufferers, burned alive, disembowelled, pierced with arrows, or mauled by wild beasts. At the threshold of nearly every Gothic cathedral, worshippers passed under a carving depicting the end of time. A stern Christ sat enthroned in judgment, presiding over a

graveyard from which he divided the saved from the damned. Paradise was no longer now open to all but a walled city. Hell was a huge serpent swallowing its human prey, a grinding machine, or a raging fire into which demons armed with pitchforks tossed anguished souls.

What brought about these changes? Why did Christians turn from a vision of paradise in this life to a focus on the Crucifixion and final judgment? How did images of terror, torture, and the desolation of the earth come to permeate the religious imagination of Western Christianity? Why did Christianity's white poppy turn red?

It was thanks to theologian Paschasius Radbertus, who laid out an unprecedented interpretation that the consecrated elements of the Eucharist were the material, historical body of Christ, and the bread and cup made the *crucified* blood and flesh of the Lord present.

The Paschaian view of the Eucharist would become established doctrine in Europe. Denying this view would be heresy. This interpretation of the Eucharist defined every Christian who looked at the image of the dead Christ or ate of his crucified body and blood as being as guilty as someone who crucified him.

This was contrary to white poppy Christianity's prohibition against the shedding of human blood. For centuries, the church had taught that participation in warfare was evil, that killing broke the fifth commandment, and that soldiers were to perform penance to cleanse their souls from the stain of blood. At the dawn of the Holy Roman Empire, Christianity began to lose its grip on the sinfulness of killing. A new age began — one in which the execution of Jesus would become a sacrifice to be repeated, first on the Eucharistic altar and then in the ravages of a full-blown holy war.

The decisive turning point came in 1095 when Pope Urban II called the First Crusade. Urban summoned nobles, bishops, monks, and laity from across Europe to Clermont, France, where he urged them to take up arms and journey to Jerusalem to attack the “bastard Turks.” (Sound familiar?) Urban told them, “Your own blood-brothers, your companions . . . are flogged and exiled as slaves for sale in their own land. Christian blood, redeemed by the blood of Christ, has been shed, and Christian flesh, akin to the flesh of Christ, has been subjected to unspeakable degradation and servitude.”

Urban then pronounced the ultimate incentive: “Whoever goes on the journey to free the church of God in Jerusalem . . . can substitute the journey for all penance for sin.” With these words, he reversed nearly a thousand years of Christian teaching about the sin of shedding human blood. War ceased being a sin and became a way to atone for sin. Killing became a mode of penance, a pathway to paradise.

Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury completed the eleventh-century theological developments that led to the Crusade with his new doctrine of substitutionary atonement. In a treatise published in 1098, he drew his analogies of sin and recompense from an emerging monetary system that, for many, resulted in crushing debt and the desperate struggle to pay it off. God, for Anselm, was like a feudal lord who willed only what was just. Those who do not honour God with obedience dishonour God, and thus they sin. The sinner must “repay what he has plundered,” Anselm wrote, and must “give back more than he took away.” Sinners bore both the burden of repayment for their own sins and for the original sinfulness of human nature. Anselm believed God would punish human beings and bar them from heaven unless they had performed sufficient penance to fulfil their debt, but humanity's level of debt for sin was

beyond any human capacity to repay it. Nonetheless, unless it was paid, none could enter heaven; all would go to hell. To override this double bind, God paid humanity's debt. He became incarnate in Christ Jesus to die on the cross, offering the gift of his death to pay for humanity's crimes.

"The gift of death," not the gift of life, was the greatest gift that God could give. God took pleasure in this death. As a recompense for sin, the Crucifixion returned humanity's debt beyond any repayment due to God. Red poppy Christianity was in full bloom.

With the advent of Crucifixion-centred theologies, paradise was lost. It was no longer a spiritual realm to be entered in this life. It was postponed to the hereafter, or secularised, as a land to be conquered. When Christopher Columbus set sail, he was looking for the fabled gold and jewels of paradise. Colonisation, with its exploitation of peoples and lands, evolved from the loss of paradise. Materialism filled the spiritual void. We live now within the dominant culture of the West in the aftermath of the closing of paradise. We live with the legacy of colonialism, militarism, racism, and exploitation of the earth and its peoples that has put paradise at risk.

The myth that violence redeems is a myth, in the sense that it is untrue. It also goes back to a myth in 4th century BC Babylon. There is something in our human nature that wants it to be true.

One of my top ten favourite films is *The Princess Bride* and the characters' desire for revenge. Yet at the end of the book the grandfather who has been reading the book to his grandson have this interchange:

THE KID

Who gets Humperdinck?

GRANDFATHER

I don't understand.

THE KID

Who kills Prince Humperdinck? At the end, somebody's got to do it. Who?

GRANDFATHER

Nobody. Nobody kills him. He lives.

THE KID

You mean he wins? Gee, Grandpa! What did you read me this thing for?

Yes, Prince Humperdinck, the film's baddie, does indeed survive, and our heroes ride off into the sunset leaving him merely tied to a chair counter to the myth of redemptive violence.

Yet the ending, perhaps surprisingly, is a satisfying one.

It's surprising because we seem to be wired for vengeance. I'm sure people have enjoyed seeing bullies get their comeuppance since the beginning of time – but I suspect it has exacerbated the problem. *The Princess Bride* points out that violence gives about as much real and lasting satisfaction as pornography.

A recent example is “Egg boy”, the young man who egged an anti-Muslim Australian politician. It went viral on the Internet, heralding him as a hero. At first he may have enjoyed the notoriety, but a few days later he acknowledged it was not the right thing to do. It was wrong.

It is an acknowledgement of a second myth — that some people embody pure evil. Like the myth of redemptive violence, it is untrue. Violence cannot redeem violence, even when people commit acts of despicable violence. When we conquer evil with more violence it may make us feel good, but nothing good comes of it.

ANZAC Day is a celebration of these myths. While the local RSA will argue that the Dawn Parade with all of its militaristic pomp, trappings and Red Poppies concluding with the emotional Last Post is about remembering those who made the supreme sacrifice, it is at a core a perpetuation of these myths, providing only a brief moment of satisfaction where nothing is changed. The White Poppy is an invitation to once again claim a non-violent paradise in the here and now against whatever our temporal desires for violence might crave.