

“Peace be with you”

Homily for ANZAC Day services at St Pauls Cathedral, 2021

On Anzac Day we recall with admiration and gratitude the courage and great personal sacrifices of those who served in the wars in which Australia has been involved, and the families who supported them at home.

Only one of those wars, WW2, was to protect Australia from invasion. Some of the others were to support allies in protecting themselves from unjustified invasion or to contain a civil war. One aspect of honouring those sacrifices is to discern lessons from the conflicts, decide what action to take, and to commit to full implementation of those.

The readings for the day give us guidance about that evaluation. In the familiar Psalm 23, we are told that the Lord leads us in ‘right paths’. The verses from Acts proclaim Jesus as the ‘cornerstone’ of our faith. The other readings, echoing Psalm 23, describe Jesus ‘as the Good Shepherd’ who lays down his life for the sheep.

These ‘right paths’, this ‘cornerstone’ of faith, through which the ‘Good Shepherd’ leads us has many implications, but one which is especially clear on Easter Day, stands out above all others: the ‘right path’ of Peace!

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be ‘the Prince of Peace’. Jesus expressed the centrality of peace in his famous Beatitude: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.’ On the day of the Resurrection – the ‘cornerstone’ day of the church – Jesus came and stood amongst his disciples, and his *first* words to them were ‘Peace be with you’ (John 20:19-21).

A vision for peace is expressed repeatedly in the Bible. It is unmissable in Jesus. This is no accident. Love, reconciling love, the overcoming of alienation and hostility, is the very nature, the will, and the activity of God in the world. As Jesus explicitly states, ‘the Father and I are one’ (John 10:30); one in the love that makes for peace.

Most of us long for peace. Seeking peace is a personal goal. In our democracy, it must be a national goal too, because that is the wish of most voters. Peacebuilding is one aspect of the responsibilities of every person, organisation, government, and church.

Here the mission of the church as embodied in Jesus, and the aspirations of a mainly secular society, coincide and can mutually support one another. Jesus said in the reading from John’s Gospel, ‘I have other sheep that do not belong to this [my] fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice’. The resurrection voice speaks reconciliation and peace to the world.

Many of the military service men and women who returned from the World Wars, from Korea and Viet Nam, from Iraq and Afghanistan say: ‘Never again’. Often, they cannot speak about the horrors which they have experienced. Many have been deeply traumatised. So many have suicided that a Royal Commission was announced last week. Certainly, most of the wives, husbands, parents, and children of those serving in wars long for the conflicts to end.

Seeking peace is therefore a goal for each of us in each aspect of our lives. There is much wonderful writing of many kinds about how to do that. This morning I am going to suggest a few ways in which all those concerned for peace – including the church, its members and those of other faiths and no faith - can attempt to contribute to international peace through national policy.

We are fortunate that in the twentieth century the international framework for peacemaking was gradually improved. Lessons from the League of Nations, the Paris Peace Treaty banning war and the horrors of the Second World War led to the negotiation of the United Nations Charter.

Article 1 of the Charter states that UN membership commits countries to maintain ‘international peace and security, and to that end to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression’.

That commitment has been reiterated many times during succeeding decades, most recently in the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015. Yet there are still many wars. In each of the last four years there have been over 50 wars, mostly civil wars, more than at any time since 1945. Many countries are not implementing the rules to which they committed themselves by joining the UN.

The most serious failure is through possession of nuclear weapons. These threaten the survival of humankind. Nuclear weapons are a challenge to God for they have the power to destroy all that He has created in this world. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which started here in Melbourne, led negotiation of the Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons. Australia should sign and ratify the Treaty as 54 other countries including New Zealand have already done, and advocate that all other countries do the same.

Since the upsurge of violent conflict began a decade ago many countries have been increasing military spending, to its highest peacetime level ever. Australia has doubled military spending during the last decade. Australia is currently participating in an arms race.

Buying more weapons is commonly rationalized as making us safer. Perhaps the weapons will discourage a potential enemy from attacking us. But it also motivates a competitor to increase the sophistication of their weapons, and so an arms race begins, reducing everyone’s security.

Power-hungry governments want to use the weapons. Aggression is encouraged. **If we seriously want to live peaceful lives, military spending must be minimised.** No one has yet explained adequately why Australia needs 12 new submarines. Not only would that squander \$90 billion. It is also counter-productive because it stimulates other countries to spend more on their weapons.

With a tiny fraction of those funds, Australia could greatly increase peacebuilding. Our diplomats, military and police have made valuable contributions to peacebuilding in Cambodia, Timor Leste, Bougainville, and Solomon Islands. But commonly Australia’s reaction to conflict is largely militaristic. Rather than analysing the causes and considering whether there is scope for diplomatic dialogue, the first question considered tends to be whether to send in the Defence Force.

Governments are not adequately conscious of the potential value of professional peacebuilding. Australian diplomatic capacity urgently requires upgrading. **The proportion of Commonwealth funding allocated for diplomacy has been halved during the last 25 years.** This has left the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade severely underfunded and understaffed.

It is essential that Australian public diplomacy be strengthened. This requires substantially increasing diplomatic funding, staffing, and training in conflict analysis, negotiation, mediation, and other peacebuilding methods. Strengthening support for United Nations peacebuilding is essential.

Jesus said those who make peace in this world are ‘called children of God’. This is because they embody and enact in their lives the being, nature and will of God the Reconciler.

Experience in some other countries shows that there can be great value in establishing a non-government peace centre. Unofficial dialogues with a wide range of stakeholders in more flexible and conducive spaces can contribute to effective peacebuilding.

A striking gap in Australian peacebuilding capacity is the lack of a high quality, well-funded, professional, non-government peace centre. That is why I have been campaigning for such a centre and why the University of Melbourne is establishing a Peacebuilding Initiative. It will become a Centre when sufficient funds are contributed.

The Initiative was launched publicly by Duncan Maskell, the Vice Chancellor, last week. It is already undertaking research, will engage in conflict situations by supporting those seeking peace: and expand analytical teaching about conflict and peace in the Indo-Pacific region.

Jesus commanded us to ‘love our neighbours as ourselves’. He didn’t tell us to abandon our interests. If we want the security of peaceful international relations, the responsible framework must be to seek peaceful conflict resolution whenever possible.

Australia’s foreign policy has been seriously weakened by the emasculation of Australia’s aid program. The slashing of aid undermines assistance to countries attempting to reduce poverty, unemployment, inequality, and greenhouse gas emissions. Loving our neighbours surely includes accepting collective responsibilities for supporting impoverished countries in improving the wellbeing of their citizens.

It certainly includes welcoming new immigrants. Since 1945 the dramatic growth of immigration has often led to effective community welcome programs which have increased inter-ethnic solidarity.

A central aspect of peacebuilding is to identify and acknowledge injustices. Commitment to increasing justice is a necessary condition for seeking peace. Within Australia this applies particularly to relations between First Nation residents and the much more recent settlers. The planned establishment of a Victorian Truth and Justice Commission is likely to be the most substantial step possible to moving towards peace between First Nation peoples and descendants of colonial settlers.

We will each contribute more to national and international peace if we are at peace within ourselves and in our families, communities, and workplaces. There are plenty of challenges there for each of us.

On this day, when we commemorate the sacrifice so many have made to oppose violence and create paths to reconciliation, let us remember Jesus’ greeting to his disciples on the day of his resurrection: ‘Peace be with you’; and resolve to live as he lived: speaking peace, making peace, building peace.

This is part of the work of God in the world.

Professor John Langmore
langmore@unimelb.edu.au