



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Laying down our Lives

John 10:11-18; 1 John 3:16-24; Ps 23

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Today being ANZAC day, we remember those, who at any time have lost their lives for our country, the British Commonwealth or Empire. It is a time to remember great sacrifices that were made.

In the gospel reading today, we heard of Jesus laying down his life - laying it down that he might save all who put their faith in him. It started with that beautiful yet rather bald statement from Jesus: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." [John 10:11]

He continued in verses 17 & 18:

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.

Jesus went on to contrast a true shepherd with a hired helper. The shepherd has commitment and relationship with the sheep. The hired man comes, does what he has to, takes his money and goes. We have all seen at times uncommitted staff in shops. They don't care about the business or the customers. Usually they are more concerned to talk to each other than serve. They are like the hired men Jesus is talking about. A casual labourer is not going to risk his life for the sheep. Yet that is what a shepherd did routinely. He stood against thieves and predators to defend the flock.

I found an advertisement my great, great grandfather placed in the newspaper offering a reward for information about some of his stock which were stolen from his farm. Sheep rustling is now rare in NZ, but it does happen sometimes. Because in our culture, land is owned and fenced, the farmer can leave the sheep alone and sleep at night. But where there are no fences, the sheep have to be watched lest they stray away and in some countries protected against predators as well.

You may remember when doubt was cast on the young David's ability to fight Goliath, he said,

"Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned

on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear ...”¹

This was from a boy of about fifteen! Bedouin and African shepherds still guard their sheep to this day. I was surprised to learn from John Qbei (one of the priests who visited us from Kondo) that he had lost a herd of five goats to a leopard over two nights) – the risk is real.

Jesus goes further than that; he says he is going to lay down his life for the sheep and that he will take it up again. Here, speaking before the crucifixion, he declares that God had given him authority to lay down his life and authority to take it up again. It is not that events got the better of him and the politicians won – it was his intention to die for the sake of the sheep – for us.

And it wasn't that we were so very lovely! We have all sinned and gone astray like lost sheep.² We have all rebelled against him. In fact, Paul wrote in Romans 5:7-8, 10:

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ...¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

In John 15, Jesus said to the disciples:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. [John 15:12-14]

And in the first Epistle of John, it is restated:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. [1 John 5:16]

Now, this is not usually going to be physical death in our setting, but it will be putting to death the selfish inner man or woman. It will be preferring others above oneself.

I want to tell you two true stories. The first is of a man I met in 2006 at the New Wine conference in England. He was manning a display stand for an organisation which supports the persecuted church.

We got talking and he told me something of his life story. He had had a rough upbringing and ran away to the Navy at a young age to escape from his father. He was a tough character. He had been the heavy-weight boxing champion of the RN. He was a member of the Special Boat Service, the Navy's equivalent of the SAS. During the Burma Campaign, he was dropped behind enemy lines on a mission to ferment resistance amongst the Malaysians against the communists. He was told he would be picked up after 6 months if he were still alive and they didn't expect to see him again. Well - he survived. He had gone undercover to deal with terrorists and upset their plans – daily risking death probably by horrific means had he been found out.

During that conference there was a teaching theme of “Faith as Courage.” It made me wonder what that man would say about it. I found him again and asked him, “How do you train men to be courageous?”

His reply surprised me – “It's love i' nit!” He told me that he had just been a guest speaker at a naval base speaking to the young men in the SBS. He asked them, what do you want when you are under fire?” They suggested weapons and a few other things. He said, “What about love?” “None of that sissy stuff,” they said.

¹ 1 Samuel 17:34-36

² Isaiah 53:6

“No.” he said, “But don’t you want someone who will defend you at all costs? Don’t you want a mate who will risk his life for you?”

“Oh, sure, you’ve got to have that!”

“Well that is love,” he said. Jesus said, “Greater love has no man than he lay down his life for his friends.”

He said to me, “Men take risks in battle for each other not for the flag or the country. It’s about your mate and keeping your squad alive. It’s love for each other. That is the only thing that makes us risk our lives.”

Two years later I was in Washington, DC and visited the Smithsonian Institute Aeronautical museum. There I found the second story. Among amazing aircraft - like the supersonic Blackbird and the Space Shuttle - was a display about a helicopter pilot who had been awarded the Medal of Honor for his bravery during the Vietnam war. I will read an abbreviated form of the citation.

On 6th January 1968, Major Patrick Brady was serving in Vietnam in command of an Iroquois ambulance helicopter. He volunteered to rescue wounded men from a site in enemy-held territory which was heavily defended and blanketed by fog. To reach the site he descended through heavy fog and smoke and hovered slowly along a valley trail, turning his craft sideward to blow away the fog with the backwash from his rotor blades. Despite the unchallenged, close-range enemy fire, he found the dangerously small site, where he successfully landed and evacuated two badly wounded South Vietnamese soldiers.

He was then called to another area completely covered by dense fog where American casualties lay only 50 metres from the enemy. Two evacuation helicopters had already been shot down there and others had made unsuccessful attempts to reach this site earlier in the day. With unmatched skill and extraordinary courage, Maj. Brady made **four** flights to this embattled landing zone and successfully rescued all the wounded.

On his third mission of the day Maj. Brady once again landed at an unsecured site surrounded by the enemy. Although his aircraft had been badly damaged and his controls partially shot away during his initial entry into this area, he returned minutes later and rescued the remaining injured.

Shortly afterwards, obtaining a replacement aircraft, Maj. Brady was requested to land in an enemy minefield where a platoon of American soldiers was trapped. A mine detonated near his helicopter, wounding two crew members and damaging his ship. In spite of this, he managed to fly six severely injured patients to medical aid.

Throughout that day Maj. BRADY flew three helicopters to evacuate a total of 51 seriously wounded men, many of whom would have perished without prompt medical treatment.³

That is an impressive catalogue of bravery. But what struck me most was the comment he made when he was asked why he did it. “It’s love.” He went on to explain that it is love which made him risk his life to save others. He could not leave them lying wounded to die there without trying his very best to rescue them. “Greater love has no man than that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Both the Naval man and the American pilot were Christians; both were very brave; both knew the substance of their courage to be self-giving love for their fellows. When we wonder if we could or can find the courage for self-sacrifice these two men tell us it is love which is the motive and the wellspring of courage.

³ See Wikipedia on Patrick_Henry_Brady

Bugle Calls

We are in the Easter season of the Church year. We have recently celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Day. The ideas of Jesus dying and rising again to life are prominent. And these give us hope as we remember the loss of life in war.

You may have watched the funeral of Prince Philip last week. If so, you would have heard the Last Post played. In military funerals and remembrance services it is a powerful tradition – the Last Post and the Reveille.

Do you know what they symbolise in the memorial service? The Last Post is of course the bugle call to tell the troops the day is over and they can go to their rest. The reveille is the call in morning to wake up the soldiers.

At a funeral or a memorial service, the symbolism of the Last Post is that it is the end of the day meaning the earthly life for this person, it is time to sleep.

Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul use sleep as a metaphor for death because of the expectation that a sleeper will awaken, and so too the expectation that the dead will rise to life again at the resurrection.

Then comes the bugle call of the Reveille. It is a new day; time to get up; Rise! This is played to symbolise the resurrection, when the trumpet of the Archangel will sound and call the dead to new life.

Those bugle calls are a reminder of the hope we have of eternal life. The Christian hope is of the resurrection of the dead. We have this hope of life after death. Jesus spoke of that eternal life when he met Martha the sister of Lazarus who had been dead three days. He said to Martha,

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.⁴

First: *The one believing in me, even if he die, he shall live.* The first death is the death of the body but not of the spirit - there is life continuing beyond the grave.

Second: *Whoever lives in me and believes in me shall [literally] never, never die into the ages.* The believer in Jesus will not experience the second death - eternal death – which is exclusion from God's presence.

So we remember those lost in the wars with the Last Post, the silence and the Reveille. But at the same time we are reminded of hope we have which goes beyond the grave into eternity – hope of eternal life in the Lord.

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⁴ John 11:25-26