

FOUNDERS' DAY SERMON 2015

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's three-in-one commemoration is a very special occasion – one hundred years yesterday since the Gallipoli landing, and ninety since the inception of this college.

90 and 100! – numbers with no **intrinsic** value although try telling that to our collective consciousness **this** week. Or to a cricketer, specifically a batsman. 90 – entrance to the nervous nineties. Suddenly the ball is smaller, the pitch trickier. A 100! Euphoria. The shackles are off. Now it's a perfectly flat track again. **Yes, numbers do matter!**

The number I want to concentrate on this morning though, isn't ninety, **or** one hundred; it's twenty! – the twenty young men whose names will shortly be read out to us by our College Club president, Mr Nick Holloway. The twenty young men who sacrificed their lives on foreign battlefields in the noble cause of freedom. What could be more appropriate on this one hundredth ANZAC anniversary than to pay them special tribute? Cut off in the flower of youth, mostly before their academic careers had fully bloomed, they are as foundational to the heritage of St Mark's College as the ANZAC tradition is to our national identity. And we may well ask; if it hadn't been for their sacrifice, and that of countless others like them, **would we still possess the personal freedoms we value so highly today?**

Last year, in this sermon, I extolled the virtues of Sir Archibald Grenfell Price, the founder to whom [*according to Dr Reed, former Bishop of Adelaide*], "this college owes, more than to any other person, its existence and enviable reputation." And I recall mentioning that by Archie's own admission, the early months, indeed the early years of his appointment, were undiluted hell.

For freedom's sake, our twenty young men endured hell too, hell of a very different kind, one which warrants a brief reflection.

A few years ago, Ellie and I made a sobering visit to the war cemeteries of Flanders where we met a Belgian café owner who advised us to read Edward Lynch's, *Somme Mud*. He said it was the most realistic account of soldiers' lives in the trenches during World War 1 and I think he's right! It's painfully gripping! Nothing glorified. No emotion spared. So it's to Lynch that I'm indebted now to provide an insight into our twenty young men's personal hell.

Private Lynch is with his platoon at Passchendaele in the wet and miserable, pre-dawn darkness. *Enemy shells are crashing everywhere. The fires of hell flicker and vicious tongues of flame lick the darkness on every side. Through it the first batches of wounded are coming back. Walking, staggering, lurching, limping back. Men with blood-stained bandages and men with none. Men carrying smashed arms, others painfully limping on shattered legs. Laughing men and shivering men. Men with calm, quiet faces and fellows with jumping blood-shot eyes above pain-racked and tortured faces. Men walking back as if there's nothing left to harm them and others who flinch and jump and throw themselves into shell holes at every shell burst and at each whistle of a passing bullet. Wounded men who have done their job.*

Can we ever really put ourselves in the boots of these young men, even for a moment? And what was it like to die on a foreign battlefield, so young, so far from home and loved ones? Here's Lynch again a few months later at Villers-Bretonneux. It's evening and the troops are moving into line past unburied bodies from earlier fighting.

Snow touches my arm and nods toward the ground. A young Australian boy lies dead at our feet. Still clasped in his hands is a letter he had been reading as his life ebbed away on this open field. Opening and reading a letter with death approaching to dim his eyes forever. Poor little chap! His dying thoughts were centred on this letter and its beloved writer back in Australia. It's a harrowing sight to us. I take the letter, tear it into fifty pieces and scatter them on the night breeze.

For all we know, that “poor little chap” was a Marksman, one of our own. Which begs a question. Was the brutal slaughter and sheer horror of the Great War ultimately futile? The Anglo-Saxon world tended to that view at the time. Poet Ted Hughes called it “defeat around whose neck someone hung a victory medal.” The French didn’t think so of course. They had a million uninvited guests in the north of their country who **had** to be expelled so it wasn’t futile to them.

Another question which has often been asked [*and Lynch asks it in a roundabout way*]: “Where was God in all of this?” It’s a profound theological issue and any answer offered this side of eternity must surely be grossly inadequate. Suffice it to say that the precious freedom for which our twenty Marksmen sacrificed their lives, is no different in essence to the freedom God gifts to you and me; freedom to live our lives without interference, choosing between good and evil, with all the consequences, small and big, and sometimes momentous, that our choices confer. If it were not so, we’d be puppets on a string.

As it stands, the only string attached is that ultimately, when this vast human tapestry into which we are woven is finally complete, every one of us will have to give an account to the Master Weaver of the way we’ve individually threaded ourselves into its grand pattern.

In the end, every nuanced and complex motivation of the human heart will be unravelled and restituted in ways we dare not even begin to imagine. If we really believe in the God-given freedom of the human will, it can hardly be otherwise.

But take heart from those words of Isaiah, read by our Board Chairman. Isaiah was gifted with spiritual insight to see beyond the depressing and all-too-familiar misery of war in his own day. He was given a glimpse far into the future – a future certainly more distant than our own day – a time of untrammelled peace and prosperity, a time when nations go to war no more. Meanwhile, we are simply asked to trust the One who had no greater love than to lay down **his** life for **us**, the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This morning we honour the twenty young Marksmen who never returned from war. We salute their courage and devotion to duty in the face of hellish adversity. On this Founder's Day, we honour, not only them, and our patron saint, St Mark, but **all** who have gone before us, whose personal sacrifices have made St Mark's a unique and wonderful community in which to live and work. Finally I leave you to ponder the words of Britain's Prime Minister in World War 1, David Lloyd George. "In glittering white," he said, "the great pinnacle of sacrifice, points like a rugged finger to heaven."

Amen.