
Commemorating Anzac Day

David d'Lima JP BTh Dip Ed

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- Simpson's grave
at Gallipoli

God bless Australia, our land Australia

Home of the Anzacs, the strong and the free

It's our homeland, our own land, to cherish for eternity

God bless Australia, the land of the free

- from "God bless Australia" by Jack O'Hagan, c.1901

Understanding the significance of the Anzac tradition

The members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps served bravely at Gallipoli and beyond in wars they mostly did not understand, yet they were instrumental in forming the Australian identity as they fought for freedom. Lessons may be applied today as we look back upon the Anzac tradition to understand how God used the nation and its people. More importantly we may highlight the gospel message that is contained in the Anzac Day ceremony.

Always held on 25th April, every Anzac Day commemoration provides the opportunity for local churches to reach out to the community. So Anzac Day events may consider such key questions as death and dying, nation-building, and God's gift of free choice, which humanity sometimes uses so wrongly that warfare is reluctantly required, to secure the peace.

The people of God may utilise Anzac Day as we help the community consider two key truths: Firstly, the playing of the bugle on Anzac Day is included in the ceremony to prefigure the last trumpet that will call the faithful to rise into eternal life. In such proclamation we do not impose a theological or spiritual interpretation upon the Anzac Day ceremony, but we reveal or highlight its original meaning. Secondly, we can explain how God has employed Australia as a valued vessel of his own grace and goodness (through such activities as the various Anzac engagements) and we can sound a warning that today our nation is at risk of losing its status as a vessel in God's hand. Instead, Australia's peaceful history and role to enrich other nations can continue only if we engage in a process of personal and national repentance and reformation.

Anzac Day and the nation as a vessel of God

Another theme to assert on Anzac Day is the nation's responsibility to engage in repentance and reformation, recognising how God wishes to bless the people anew, and continue using Australia's nation-building work in overseas lands. Through military deployment (especially in peace-keeping activities) we may see how Australia has served as a vessel in the hands of God - who alone may *"announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up"* (Jeremiah 18:9).

God has wonderfully utilised the Australian nation to build up other countries. So the Anzacs are especially loved in Israel, as our forces delivered the city of Beersheba, leading to the liberation of Jerusalem and the founding of modern Israel. Beersheba was in fact freed on Reformation Day (31st October) 1917 - the same day that Britain decided to give the Jews a homeland. The Anzacs during the two world wars also helped to liberate many other nations. Then Australia gave Papua New Guinea the gift of nationhood in 1975 and led other countries cooperatively to establish the new nation of East Timor in 2002.

But our country cannot remain in the favoured position as a vessel useful to Almighty God our maker and sustainer, if we persist in rebellion. Our very existence as a people is in grave peril as our land engages in national sin.

Yet God desires to forgive and to restore as we turn from wrong-doing. Our prayer is that each individual will receive the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and that as a consequence of that personal reformation, our nation would embrace values and practices which are pleasing to God. Only then will he bless and heal our land, and may continue to use our nation as an instrument that is valuable to his own glorious plan and purpose.

At a special service or community event, Christians may gather people from the local areas and share with them a commemoration of Anzac Day. This could provide an opportunity not simply to look back as we honour the sacrifice of the Anzacs, but also to work towards securing the future, which of course must always begin with our personal pilgrimage of repentance and salvation, and which must also include such concepts as the blessing of God upon the nation (if corporately the people will respond in repentance and faith).

Greeting cards distributed in the neighbourhood could detail a personal and national perspective on Anzac Day, and might also include a recipe for Anzac biscuits, to promote family and individual enrichment along with civic pride.

Upholding the Anzac ideal

Enjoying great peace and prosperity, Australians are keen to contemplate the Anzac legacy. So there has been a vast resurgence of interest in dawn services and the number of Australians spending Anzac Day at Gallipoli grew from 200 (in 1988) to 20,000 (in 2005). Further, in 1995 a tradition commenced as Essendon and Collingwood clashed at the first AFL Anzac Day game. At those matches, a brief period of silence is kept by the crowd of over 90,000 supporters - as preceded by the *Last Post* and followed by the *Rouse*. A flag ceremony is held, war veterans are recognised, and the Anzac Day Medal is awarded after the match to the player who best exemplifies the Anzac spirit: *skill, courage, self-sacrifice, teamwork and fair play*. Though it has led to negative responses in the media, the game is consistent with the view of the original Anzacs who in 1916 held a sports event on the first Anzac Day.

Using Anzac Day for community outreach

Churches commemorating Anzac Day can highlight the gospel motifs in the traditional ceremony: A Dawn Service may include the *Last Post* with flags at half-mast (depicting the temporary triumph of death), followed by a minute of silence (symbolising sleep), and then the raising of the flag to the peak, accompanied by the *Rouse* (denoting resurrection). Commemorations may also feature service personnel in uniform, the laying of wreaths, the wearing of rosemary sprigs (which grow wild at Gallipoli), and the reciting of *The Ode*. Sunday School groups could bake Anzac biscuits, and a youth choir could sing *God bless Australia* (that closed ABC TV broadcasts daily until the 1970s). A giant screening of the Anzac Day match is another outreach possibility.

Finally we may describe how heroes such as **John Simpson Kirkpatrick** (1892-1915) reflect Jesus Christ. Simpson and his donkey saved perhaps hundreds of Anzacs at Gallipoli. Giving no thought to his own safety, Simpson lasted for only 24 days. His life and action illustrate the ideal described by Jesus: "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13 KJV), and "*I am among you as one who serves*" (Luke 22:27). Killed at the age of 22, he was regarded by a colleague as "like Christ".



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