



Message from the Moderator

 Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

Anzac Day 2018

The commemoration of New Zealand's involvement in both the first and second world wars has taken on a new life in the last 20 years or so. Crowds have grown at Anzac Day services, particularly among the young. Children and young people seem to make up at least a half of the congregation gathered for this special day and they usually have to sacrifice considerable comfort as they turn up to dawn services very early on those chilly Autumn days.

There is speculation about what is driving this unusual display of identification with generations past, but that it exists is beyond question.

The connection today's young people are experiencing with this violent part of our history is occurring against a background of growing pacifist sentiment here in Aotearoa, and in the West generally. Indeed, since the Vietnam War in the 60s, youth have generally been identified with an anti-military stance and a latent pacifism that dislikes military solutions. This is, to my mind at least, as it should be.

There should always be a policy of military involvement only being considered after all else has failed. The results of military action are almost always relative and incomplete creating – at best – an opportunity to resume building a peaceful and free state.

The question remains, however, whether military force is able to be a part of a Christian solution to the political and social realities of human life. Can force ever be said to be a Christian option? Do we have to settle for violence?

Whatever else may be said on this matter – and it is, admittedly, something that has occupied debate and discussion for centuries – several realities remain uncontested.

Firstly, fallen humankind, sinful humankind will use power to enforce its will on others and that includes military power. In these circumstances, history often demonstrates that nothing short of a display of balancing power will stop the violence. Military action against Isis or Daesh (as they are otherwise referred to) is a good example. The terrorists who drove the violent Isis crusade represent no one but themselves and have been disowned by most of the Muslim world.

A letter to David Cameron signed by the Islamic Society of Britain and the Association of Muslim Lawyers made this very clear when it stated (regarding Isis): “It is neither Islamic, nor is it a State. The group has no standing with faithful Muslims, nor among the international community of nations.”

So this group who has no standing with the majority of peace-loving Muslims uses unconscionable force and violence to achieve its aims, and the only thing that will cause those involved in it to give heed to the voices of the innocents caught up in this violence is in fact, violence itself.

And this is, in the end, what has happened: a coalition of western military has supported Iraqi military, and Russia has supported the Syrian military to defeat Isis. It hasn't been easy and the violence has still not abated, but the alternative was to allow a violent faction take root in the world. And this brings me to my second point.

In this life and in certain situations where the State or, indeed, the world is faced with power that chooses violence – violence seems to be required to bring about a just solution.

In such situations, however, it must also be admitted that the outcomes are extremely limited and often, in themselves, full of injustice. Innocent people are killed, violent people are exalted and the states which are left are often not much better off than before. Despite this, one must ask whether the alternative would have been preferred.

Last century New Zealand lost thousands of men and women fighting a regime which chose violence to enforce its will on its own people and on the nations around it. It was determined to rule Western Europe and, in doing so, to rule the world. Today we no longer live with that threat because of their sacrifice. God forbid it should ever happen again, but if it does, I wonder if we'd make that same sacrifice so that our children and grandchildren might live in relative freedom again?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rt Rev Richard Dawson'.

Rt Rev Richard Dawson
Moderator Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand