

ANZAC Day 2010

The White Poppy

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Today of course is ANZAC day – a day where we pause and remember those who have fallen in war and especially cantering around the disastrous and completely ludicrous campaign at Gallipoli.

Here thousands of men were senselessly slaughtered. For me Gallipoli is a poignant reminder of the senselessness and stupidity of war.

Each year we are encouraged to wear a red poppy as part of our remembering.

The red poppy flowered in the fields of Flanders even when everything else was destroyed by the horrors of warfare.

This famous poem captures the picture:

In Flanders fields the poppies grow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

This year in New Zealand a white poppy has been introduced. This is not a poppy of remembrance but is a poppy of peace.

When I first heard about it I thought it was most appropriate and was completely taken off guard by the vociferous reaction of both the minister of Veteran Affairs Judith Collins and representatives of the RSA.

Judith Collin said the Peace Union, which introduced the white poppy, should be ashamed of themselves, whilst the RSA representative bemoaned the fact that donations for the white poppy were taking resources away from the RSA.

I didn't think that ANZAC day was supposed to be an opportunity for collecting revenue although I do understand that organisation does collect funds from donations given for red poppies.

I had never heard of the white poppy before last week but I have discovered that it has its roots back in the years after the First World War.

This war was supposed to be the 'war to end all war' but this clearly was never the case.

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles were harsh and causes of new wars were blindly enshrined in it.

Countries soon began re-building their armies and the paraphernalia of war ironically using men who had been children in 1914-18 and whose fathers had been killed in that war.

New weapons factories were developed making large profits for their owners.

People who yearned for peace knew all this was happening, and that lessons from the past had not been learnt.

A women's group, the Women's Co-operative Guild, were amongst these people.

Founded in 1883, this guild was concerned with the problems and issues of home and family but by 1918 had turned its attention to the bigger picture of global aggression.

At its congress that year the Guild declared that 'civilised nations should never again resort to the terrible and ineffectual method of war for the settlement of international disputes'.

These guildswomen had learned firsthand the extent to which war could profoundly affect and harm their lives.

Many of them were the wives, mothers and sisters of men who had been killed. They embarked on an active campaign for peace.

By 1933 they were searching for a symbol which could be worn by guildswomen who wanted to show publicly that they were **against war and for nonviolence**. Someone came up with the idea of a white poppy.'

The white poppy then emanated from a movement of women which did not want their brothers, husbands and sons to again be killed at war.

It is little wonder then that the white poppy has been the subject of scorn from the power brokers and men of our world as it has been since its introduction in 1933.

On Remembrance Day 1980 in the UK a silent procession took a wreath of white poppies to the Cenotaph in London. The inscription on the wreath said:

For all those who have died or are dying in wars
For all those who have died or are dying as resources to feed or house them have gone to war preparations
For all those who will die until we learn to live in peace
When shall we ever learn?

In 1986 a British bishop reminded people that the white poppy wasn't a mark of disrespect for dead soldiers but a reminder that we should all be working for peace: 'there is space for red and white to bloom side by side' he said.

That same year the white poppy was discussed in parliament and Margaret Thatcher, the war mongering British prime minister of the time, expressed her 'deep distaste' for them.

One year, a boy chose a white poppy and wore it proudly to his Remembrance Sunday church Scouts parade - only to be ordered by the scoutmaster to remove it: 'it's not an appropriate symbol for Remembrance Day!' The scoutmaster gave the boy a red poppy to wear instead. The boy quietly put the white poppy on again as soon as he left the church.

This is but a scant history and background to the white poppy.

People have lost jobs, been violently attacked for wearing white poppies. Wreathes and tributes of white poppies have been crushed and trampled underfoot...

...and all this surrounding the day when we remember that war that was to end all war!

Jesus uses the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice and follow.

Jesus proclaimed peace and life and we, as his followers, are called to do the same.

Every ANZAC day I read the horrors of those who were killed in battles like Gallipoli and I am moved to tears.

Every day I read the horrors of the innocents killed and tortured and raped through acts of war and abuse of power in Afghanistan, Iraqi, Palestine, Zimbabwe ... and I weep.

Every day I read of the billions of dollars spent on the machinery of war when a soldier has to watch a two year old die in Rwanda for want of simple medical aid... and I weep

I weep with the mothers who have lost their sons; I weep at the insensitivity of the powerful and the greed of the rich.

The voice of the Risen Christ surely says 'Enough!'

We are a people of the Resurrection...

Next ANZAC day I will wear a red poppy that says 'I remember'...

...but I will also wear a white poppy that says 'I am working and hoping for peace.'

I hope you will do the same.