

## Homily for ANZAC Day

By Fr Steele Hartmann

Today we celebrate ANZAC Day, a day when we honour our dead who lost their lives in war. I am really at a loss for what to say, for one does not want in any way to glorify war, for there is nothing good about war, and its first casualty is truth. In January 1973 I turned twenty. In those days twenty year olds were conscripted into the army to fight in the Vietnam War. Our political leaders told us we were there to help the people of South Vietnam defend themselves against the evil Communists of the North who were seeking to overthrow the democratic government of the South. It turns out that there was no 'invitation' from South Vietnam, the government of which was far from democratic and at best a military junta; we were there at the behest of the Americans to serve American interests.

Then I found out that at the end of World War II, during which the Japanese had kicked the European colonisers out of South East Asia, Ho Chi Minh, a leader of the Vietnamese people, approached the Americans for support in their struggle for independence against the French who wanted to re-establish themselves in their former colony. The Americans refused, siding with the French Colonialists. Ho Chi Minh turned to the Chinese, who by this time had turned communist. There ensued a war for independence, which ended in a stalemate. The country was divided North-South and both sides agreed to hold a referendum in twenty years, which would decide the fate of the whole country. As the time for the referendum drew near, and with its probable outcome seemingly unacceptable to Western powers, especially the US, hostilities were resumed. As America became actively involved in this war, we were suddenly 'invited' by the 'government' of the South to help defend them against the northern Communist 'aggressors'. For the want of a ballot, many lives were lost. For an unwillingness to accept the outcome of a free act of self-determination, much property was destroyed, many atrocities were committed. As for me: at the end of 1972 Whitlam was elected and he abolished conscription just before my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday; I didn't have to go!

Well, things haven't changed and politicians haven't changed. We got into Iraq 'to wrest control of weapons of mass destruction from the hands of an evil tyrant.' Enough said!

Today we celebrate ANZAC Day. In more recent times there has been a resurgence of interest in this celebration, especially among the young. It is now the 'thing to do' to go on pilgrimage to Anzac Cove in Turkey on this day. When one looks to discover why this renewed interest, it seems to correspond with the Commonwealth's takeover of responsibility for all things ANZAC. The Federal

Government now funds school programmes to teach our children what happened in Gallipoli. Many of our young people who are attending or have attended celebrations in Turkey on this day are the first fruits of this programme. Worryingly, this exercise in 'nation-building' seems closer to a myth-making process that borders on propaganda. Some cynics see it as an exercise designed to make going to war more acceptable by making it seem more glorious, and so make it more acceptable politically to send our troops to places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Well, there is nothing glorious about war. It is brutal and brutalising. All who are involved in it are maimed in some way — if not physically, then psychologically. Out of respect for all who will lose their lives in any conflict, we should be very sceptical of any of reasons politicians give us as to why we should be involved, and even more reluctant to agree to actually send them.

By this I do not mean in any sense to take away from the honour due our dead: they gave their life when we asked it of them. Let me finish with a story (from *Surprised by Truth*), which I think underlines the respect and the reverence and the love that must be there in anyone who would ask another to lay down their life — without it we can be sure we're being conned. It also sheds an interesting light on that passage in John's Gospel: "Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him may not be lost but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

*Once upon a time, there was a beautiful garden. There in the cool of the day the Master of the garden would walk. Of all the denizens of the garden, the most beloved was a gracious and noble Bamboo. Year after year, Bamboo grew yet more noble and gracious, conscious of his Master's love and watchful delight, but he was always modest and gentle.*

*Often, when Wind came to revel in the garden, Bamboo would cast aside his grave stateliness, to dance and play merrily, tossing and swaying and leaping and bowing in joyous abandon, leading the garden in the Great Dance which most delighted the Master's heart.*

*Now one day, the Master drew near to contemplate his Bamboo with eyes of curious expectancy. Bamboo, in a passion of adoration, bowed his great head to the ground in loving greeting. The Master spoke: "Bamboo, I wish to use you."*

*Bamboo flung his head to the sky in utter delight. The day had come, the day for which he had been made, the day to which he had been growing hour by hour, the day in which he would find his completion and his destiny. His voice became low. "Master, I am ready. Use me as you will."*

*"Bamboo," the Master's voice was grave, "I will have to take you and cut you down."*

*A trembling of a great horror shook Bamboo. "Cut me down? Me, whom you have made the most beautiful in all your Garden? Cut me down? Oh, not that! Use me for your joy, Master, but please do not cut me down."*

*"Beloved Bamboo," the Master's voice grew even more grave, "If I do not cut you down, I cannot use you."*

*The Garden grew still. Wind held his breath. Bamboo slowly bent his proud and glorious head, and he whispered, "Master, if you can't use me unless you cut me down, then do your will and cut."*

*"Bamboo, beloved Bamboo, I will have to cut your leaves and branches from you also."*

*"Master, spare me. Cut me down and lay my beauty in the dust, but would you also take from me my leaves and branches?"*

*"If I do not cut them away, I cannot use you."*

*The Sun hid his face. A listening butterfly glided fearfully away. Bamboo shivered in terrible expectancy, whispering low, "Master, cut away."*

*"I will also have to cleave you in two and cut out your heart, for if I do not cut so, I cannot use you."*

*Bamboo bowed to the ground in sorrow. "Master," he whispered, "then cut and cleave."*

*So the Master of the garden took Bamboo and cut him down and hacked off his branches and stripped him of his leaves and clove him in two and cut out his heart, and, lifting him gently, carried him to where there was a spring of fresh, sparkling water in the midst of his dry fields. Then, putting one end of broken Bamboo in the spring and the other end into the water channel in his field, the Master laid down gently his beloved Bamboo. The spring sang welcome and the clear, sparkling waters raced joyously down the channel of Bamboo's torn body into the waiting fields.*

*Then the rice was planted, and the days went by, and the shoots grew, and the harvest came.*

*In that day Bamboo, once so glorious in his stately beauty, was yet more glorious in his brokenness and humility. For in his beauty he was life abundant, but in his brokenness he became a channel of abundant life to his Master's world.*