

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

**The Reverend Andrew Sempell**

*Rector of St James*

**Pentecost 23**

**Remembrance Sunday**

(a-os32)

**12 November 2017**

**Readings:** Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78: 1-7;  
1 Thessalonians 4: 9-18; Matthew 25: 1-13.

***'Foresight and Vigilance'***

### **Events**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> October this year, we remembered the 500th anniversary of that moment when Martin Luther provided the catalyst for the European Reformation. This was an event that changed the nature of western religion, politics, education and culture. It led to an extraordinary social change called the Enlightenment and the modern era in which we still live. Yet, it also brought about the bloodiest period in European history as Catholics and Protestants warred against each other, leading to the deaths of about 30% of the German population during the 30 Years War.

The 31<sup>st</sup> October was also the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Beersheba, which included the famous mounted charge of the 4th Light Horse Brigade. It was the last great cavalry charge in modern times and was never anticipated in training, tactics or planning. It arose out of a need for water and an opportunity to take it, but it has since become a defining event in Australian military history that demonstrated audacity and cunning in warfare.

In a little over a week, it will be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the commencement of the Battle of Cambrai, in France. This battle saw the introduction of the tank, which had the capacity to break through barbed-wire entanglements. It was also a moment of change from the then worn-out tactic of attrition. The tactics at Cambrai included the more effective use of artillery, as well as the use of combined arms and close air support. It was an event that changed the direction of the war.

Events happen and can have consequences that are never envisioned and outcomes that were never planned. Moreover, given the right circumstances, they can move quickly, like a cyclone gathering momentum and creating havoc. It is often the case in war and conflict, for rarely does anything go according to plan. Good commanders have sufficient imagination and detachment to allow them to react creatively and quickly when adjusting and responding to the unexpected.

On Remembrance Sunday we recall such events of history because they shape and create us in the present. Indeed, there is an interconnectedness between past moments and now, that fashion the hearts of humanity and direct the paths of society.

## **Russian Revolution**

There is one centenary, however, that appears to have been overlooked in this past year and that is the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. In 1917 there were several uprisings and coups in Russia, as Marxist and anarchist revolutionaries (such as Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin) sought to take power. Up to and during 1917, the social effects of First World War casualties, economic ruin, poverty, and hunger created a series of events that led to unrest and eventual uprising.

Nevertheless, the outcomes of the Revolution were dire, and included:

- the end of the Romanov reign and the eventual murder of Czar Nicholas II and his family,
- nationalisation of private property, industries, and the financial system,
- confiscation of church property, persecution of the church, and the imposition of atheism,
- the brutal reign of Stalin and the ‘Great Terror’ in which millions of people were killed by the state,
- expansion of Soviet influence through the invasion and annexation of other nations, and
- the cold war, the its arms race, and ongoing tensions with the rest of the world.

Few in Russia anticipated the course of these events, nor did many appreciate the gravity of what was happening around them at the time. In October 1917, the Russian Orthodox Church was holding a Synod that had met for well over a year. No doubt there were many weighty matters seizing their attention, but as the debates raged inside the Synod chamber the bullets flew outside, as Russia descended into chaos.

The Synod met to discuss such important issues as: church governance, diocesan administration, the role of bishops, parishes, authority, and church-state relations. Nothing seems to have changed! In the fateful month of October, debate had focused on that favourite of all topics for religious practitioners, the ‘colour of vestments’.

Now while that subject may well have been the pressing issue of the day, and whereas the church should not be seen to be tossed about by the waves of trendy public opinion and popular politics, it would seem that it had missed an important matter in its midst. For in December, while the Synod was laying down the law to the government with respect to its rights over the state, such argument became totally irrelevant because the Bolsheviks had at the same time disenfranchised the Church and confiscated its property.

It would appear that the Russian Church was disconnected from the community and in denial concerning what was happening around it. It failed to be alert and therefore suffered immensely as a result.

### **Asleep at the Wheel**

*“Keep awake therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour”*

(Matthew 25:13)

These words of Jesus are wise in any situation. The meaning of today’s gospel reading is about being ready for the coming of what Jesus called the ‘kingdom of heaven’. The suggestion is that we need to be prepared for the coming of God and the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids was told to give an example of those who are either prepared or unprepared for the coming of a momentous event – in this case the arrival of the bridegroom to take the bride to his own house.

Many people today describe the church as being out of touch with reality and irrelevant to their daily lives. The behaviour of the Russian Church in the last days of its empire is perhaps indicative of how people look at the behaviour and attitudes of religious organisations today.

As an institution we do not have a right to exist, only a calling to be faithful. The Russian Church stumbled on through the time of Communism; but perhaps it had to die before it could rise again - as it has in recent decades. The mission to serve is vital to the gospel, rather than the desire to gain and retain power and control over society. A lesson that some in the Australian church need to learn.

Don’t get me wrong, the church has many wonderful gifts and blessings given it by God for the benefit of all upon earth. But they are given so that we may follow Christ, which includes our being open, vulnerable, and willing to lay down our lives for the benefit of others; and many people are faithfully doing this! There are, however, times when we lose the plot and make foolish decisions and mistakes.

Unfortunately, institutions of their nature tend to become self-focused, and so lose sight of their mission and purpose – thereby becoming asleep at the wheel! For example, there is a tension between two ways of being church. First is the ‘sectarian church’ model that defines itself by adherence to particular beliefs, the application of strict rules of membership, and the exclusion of those that are deemed not to belong. Secondly, is the ‘gathered church’ model, which is diverse, open and accessible to the body of believers that choose to turn up and participate in its activities - including its worship, education, caring and generosity.

By ignoring important issues of justice and fairness, by being discriminatory, and by seeking power rather than being a means of grace, we (the church in Australia) also stand to lose connection with the community and therefore lose its respect. In this way, we too might be consigned to the ‘dustbin of history’.

Likewise, our nation also lives in this tension between ‘exclusion’ and ‘inclusion’, which becomes apparent in our foreign and defence policies, in matters of immigration and the treatment of refugees, and in domestic policies concerning the treatment of indigenous people, the poor, the homeless, and minority groups.

### **Lest We Forget!**

*“Keep awake therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour”*

On Remembrance Sunday we have the opportunity to remind ourselves of what is good about our national life and why we value it. Justice, equity, integrity, honesty, generosity, humility, and respect, are all values for which people have fought. Indeed, many have done so on our behalf; for which we are grateful.

War is not a glorious or positive thing; rather it is a sign of human brokenness and sin, for which we should both repent and work hard at trying to avoid in the future. It is also a reminder to our leaders (in both church and state) to act with integrity and for the good of all, lest we too be locked out of the heavenly feast.

Be alert, be watchful, be vigilant, ...lest we forget....