

## Loss and Gain

17 April, 2016

*A sermon preached by the Precentor, the Revd Canon Heather Patacca, at the 10.30am Choral Eucharist on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, commemorating ANZAC Day.*

When you read of the campaigns of the ANZACS and the AIF in the Great War, or indeed when you read the history of any theatre of war, loss and gain, again and again, provide the underpinning framework to describe what is occurring. Loss of life, loss of limbs, loss of ground, loss of equipment, gains in territory secured, gaining recruits, gaining the upper hand in technological advances, gaining the tactical advantage.

Loss and gain.

As we receive the bread and wine of communion later in the service, the choir will sing a beautiful anthem, with music by Michael Leighton Jones and words spoken by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1934, although once leading Turkish troops against the ANZACs, by then Turkish President. You will find them on page 11 of your service booklet. He said:

'Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives... You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side now here in this country of ours ... you, the mothers, who sent their sons from faraway countries wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.'

In his weighing up of the loss and gain suffered at the now named ANZAC Cove, these are extraordinary words of peace and comfort.

The heroes who shed their blood and lost their lives now have gained the peace of rest, now brothers with those who also fell, irrespective of their nationality. The mothers who lost their sons, they gain the comfort of knowing their sons rest in peace in a friendly country, not alone, but resting with their new brothers, and with mothers and fathers who hold them close in their bosom as their own sons. In the pain and grief of loss, comfort is gained.

For us as Christians, because our faith is something that is lived and worked-out in the real world, it is no surprise that loss and gain feature in all our Bible readings today: whether you are a friend of God or not, loss and gain are a part of life. We may prefer the gains in life, but sometimes they come hand-in-hand with loss of various kinds. Just as it is the case for all of us with faith in Jesus Christ: whilst there may be things we give away, things that are lost for the sake of our relationship with God, there are also gains through exercising our faith. And in saying that I don't mean *wishful thinking* and *hope* are the same. If a certain 16 year old girl's parents say 'we hope she will get into medicine', when their daughter's highest mark at school has been a D+, that is a wishful statement in comparison to the parents of a girl who has averaged A+ all her years at school expressing that same hope. On past performance, you would reasonably expect that second girl to be doctor somewhere down the track.

Even if we are suffering loss, we know the promised gains which are in store, and our hope is based on our knowledge and experience of God's past performance. It is on this basis that the writer to the Hebrews encourages his readers to persevere.

We read that those receiving this letter endured hard struggle with sufferings as they cared for those in need or trouble, and they lost what was plundered from them as they went about enacting their faith in the God who does not disappoint. 'Faith', we read, 'is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'.

They are reminded in this letter of the reality of God's faithfulness in their endurance, and encouraged to have confidence for the long haul that the better things await them, that there are great gains and blessing now and in the future.

The gains and blessings are foretold in the reading from Micah. Throughout the book of Micah, there is a constant tension between, on the one hand, the reality that the people of God face divine judgement because they are breaking the covenant God made with them, and on the other hand, God's desire to bless, forgive and show mercy to his people, because his character is to do so.

Micah's prophecy describes how God's own people have lost their love of God and neighbour, and this is evidenced in their misuse of political and social power. The people fail to honour God and deal unjustly with one another. The rich and powerful are using the very Promised Land given them by God to oppress their own people. Therefore they are warned they will lose the privileges of being God's covenant people, they will lose the land, and face a time of exile from it.

In the face of this unthinkable loss, however, are words of hope and promise. Our four verse reading from Micah, Chapter 4, begins the centrepiece of the book, culminating in the promise in Chapter 5 of the one from Bethlehem whose origin is from of old, who will rule in Israel, who will feed his flock in the Lord's strength and majesty, who shall be the one of peace.

Though the people may lose their land through exile, a time will come when they will regain that land and know peace with God, and the promise of Israel being a blessing to the nations will come to pass. People from all nations shall stream to Zion, to hear God's ways so they may walk in them. And God will judge between the nations, so there will be no need for weapons like swords or spears, only the plough shears and pruning-hooks people at peace who enjoy the land and its fruits require. For the people will know real peace, the peace of God. There will be no more war. They may lose the land for a time, but they will, through returning to the Lord, regain the Promised Land and know true covenant peace.

How does that come about?

In our reading from John's gospel we have described the way by which that covenant peace is gained, through the one from Bethlehem, through the shepherd who will feed the Lord's flock.

The context of the reading is the celebration of a Passover dinner shared by Jesus and his disciples, with Jesus in full knowledge of all that was to be set in motion when he sent Judas Iscariot out into the actual and figurative darkness of the night. Jesus knew he was to lose his life, but also what gain he would accomplish for his friends and those who would later also believe in his name. And so Jesus explains the loss and gain that will occur in the coming hours to his friends.

Yes they will lose him, but they will gain the gift of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. Yes, they will lose his presence, but he will prepare a room for them and await them in his father's house.

Yes, he will lose his life, yes he will suffer untold agony, yes he will lose the support and help of the people he here calls friends, with even Peter, so named as the rock on which Jesus will build the church, denying him three times before the night is out. Jesus will lose much, emptied and humbled, but in this supreme example of love, laying down his life for his friends, he will gain glory for the Father, he will gain life-everlasting for his people. Even on the cross as his mother loses her son, he will command his friend and his mother will gain a new son, his friend a new mother. Even in such dire and horrific circumstances as the death by crucifixion Jesus was to endure, he will demonstrate the love in which the disciples stand, along with those who keep his commandments for the years to come. No one has greater love than the one from Bethlehem, as he lays down his life for his friends and opens the way for peace with God. And Jesus commands his friends to

continue to abide and walk in that love. The love that means, like those described in the letter to the Hebrews, even as we endure hard struggle with sufferings, we continue on in well-founded hope.

The one who is the great shepherd walked through the shadow of the valley of death described by our psalm today, as he laid down his life for the sheep. But he was to gain once and for all the promise of life and peace with God, so all people, just as Micah described, could come to God's presence, and know his peace.

J.A. Gault, a Methodist minister from Melbourne, was a Padre in the AIF in the Great War. It was his custom, when men were going into the firing line, to get them to repeat with him the opening line of the Twenty-third Psalm, ticking it off on the fingers of their left hands. So their little finger represented the word *The*; the ring finger, *Lord*; the middle finger, *is*; the index finger, *my*; and the thumb, shepherd. He is recorded as making a particular emphasis of the index finger – *my* shepherd - the finger that spoke of the personal choice of faith in God's shepherd who lays down his life for his friends. And men to whom he had spoken were found once the battle subsided and stretcher bearers went in to collect casualties, dead, but grasping firmly with the right hand the index finger of their left.

The Psalmist goes on to write, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me and your rod and your staff comfort me. Those men in the AIF lost their lives, but in the knowledge they would also gain a home, and safety and God's peace, through their friend and shepherd, who laid down his life for them.

Loss and gain. Over the next days as we remember and honour those who lost their lives, and their families and friends who bore that loss, we also pray that there would be that great gain of the peace of God for all in this world, and in the next.

As the psalmist concludes: Surely your goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life: and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.