

23 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Psalm 91

¹Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.^[a]

² I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."

³Surely he will save you
from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.

⁴ He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

⁵You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,

⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.

⁷A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

⁸ You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked. A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

⁸ You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

⁹ If you say, "The LORD is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
¹⁰ no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.

¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
¹² they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone

¹³ You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

¹⁴ "Because he^h loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.

¹⁵ He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honour him.

¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation."

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, our strength, and our redeemer.

We have in the readings for today, two of my favourite psalms, the others being Psalm 19 and Psalm 46.

Both Psalm 23 and Psalm 91 are very appropriate today, being ANZAC Day.

One hundred and six years ago, on this day 16,000 ANZAC troops landed at dawn on the Gallipoli Peninsula. For 650 of them the shadow of death had become the reality of the grave, although even a month later only 350 deaths had been acknowledged. There were over 2,000 casualties, dead and wounded. There would be over 8,000 Australian casualties by the end of the Gallipoli campaign, a high number but still small against the total cost of lives in World War 1. These people made the ultimate sacrifice.

Their deaths meant more than dying. There were families ripped apart. Husbands, actual and future, and fathers, actual and future, who did not return. Families that never eventuated. Women who may have never married. Children without fathers. A generation ripped apart. And such to be repeated a generation later with World War 2.

Sir Winston Churchill wrote the following words about World War 1:

The Great War differed from all ancient wars in the immense power of the combatants and their fearful agencies of destruction, and from all modern wars in the utter ruthlessness with which it was fought.

The words are equally true of World War 2.

But on that long ago day that we now call ANZAC Day none of that was foreseen. All that was seen was men landing under fire, some falling dead, some falling wounded, and others surviving. It began eight months of bloodshed for two peoples that proved to be futile for the invaders.

Why?

Due to poor planning and supply. That comes down to poor leadership. In any enterprise leadership is the key to success or to failure. In times of war, it is vital. It was missing through much of that long ago war and afterwards.

Churchill's comment about ruthlessness was appropriate. It was a new form of warfare, one that was not mobile. General Haig who commanded on the Western Front was a cavalry man, and the need for horses was ultimately only as carthorses. It was a war of attrition and that was evident at Gallipoli.

Am I moving away from the significance of today? Perhaps I am. There is a question – Where was God in all this?

Both sides of the war believed that God was on their side. Here I am moving away from ANZAC Day.

Was Gallipoli a war between the Christian God and the Muslim Allah?

To the Turks it was, and 87,000 Turks were killed. Yet, there was respect on both sides of that conflict. In 1934 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, leader of Turkey stated:

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 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.

That is a clear statement of forgiveness.

But, what of the combatant nations of Europe, all of which were Christian, at least in name? All went into combat convinced that God was with them. This led an English poet, John Squires, to write:

*God heard the embattled nations sing and shout
"Gott strafe England" and "God save the King!"
God this, God that, and God the other thing –
"Good God!" said God, "I've got my work cut out!"*

This raises the question: Was World War 1 a just war? Which leads to another question – What is a just war?

A just war is a war which is declared for right and noble reasons and fought in a certain way. A just war is not a war that is 'good' as such – it is a war that Christians feel to be necessary or 'just' in the circumstances, when all other solutions have been tried and have failed. It is a necessary evil and a last resort.

This could be the subject of a sermon in itself. I will limit my comments by saying that World War 1 was a clash between empires. In the decades that followed all the European empires would be disbanded and the peoples who were colonised became independent.

So, where was God in World War 1?

The last words of Squire's poem could be how He, that is, God, felt. God has had His work cut out since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Let us return to Psalm 23, verse 1: *"The Lord is my shepherd."* This word appears in the Bible 200 times and came to refer, not only to those who herded sheep, but to kings, ultimately referring to Jesus Christ and, of course, shepherds were among the first people to see Jesus. Remember, too, Jesus' last words to Peter, commissioning him to feed His sheep.

Let us move on to Psalm 91, verse 2: *"I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress."*

As Psalm 46 states in the opening verse, *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

The word refuge appears 67 times in the Bible and over 40 times in Psalms.

We can go to God at any time we are in need and He will listen to us. He may not answer us immediately, but He hears.

A refuge is a place of safety.

In the Old Testament when refuge is mentioned it is always in the context of a threat, something wrong or dangerous in the world. This might be physical. It might be for protection from adversaries. It might be emotional or spiritual, as in a refuge from shame or loneliness.

We also have to consider that the Bible's use of the word refuge is a reminder – that we live in a world that has been wrecked by sin which is why it is a world of danger and brokenness from which only God can save us. That is a second aspect of the word refuge to consider – that God has the power to save us from sin and its consequences, if we repent.

So, we come back to the opening of Psalm 46 - *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

As for the word fortress, we can go to Proverbs 18:10 – *“The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.”*

No matter what our circumstance, the safest place to be is always in the centre of God’s will. He promises to be our refuge: *“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”* So, we can say with confidence, *‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’* (Hebrews 13:5–6).

To be in the centre of God’s will is not to commit sin.

This next part is a difficult part of the sermon.

Sin led to World War 1. Not the sin of the people but the sin of the leaders. This is a hard part of this sermon and I had to think about it a while. To give an answer I have to talk about history.

Germany had been a more or less unified nation for only 44 years in 1914. The nation was ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm who was unhappy, to say the least, that the German Empire was so small. Outside of Europe, Britain and France had claimed much of the world as their imperial possessions, especially Britain. Here lies pride, unfulfilled pride.

France was angry with Germany because it had won the 1870 Franco-Prussian War which had seen Paris occupied and Napoleon III forced the abdicate. The provinces of Alsace-Lorraine had been lost and the latter province had been the home of Joan of Arc. France wanted revenge. In Romans 12:19 Paul wrote:

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

For France, the cost of revenge was a million deaths.

British history shows that she always intervened in Europe to prevent a strong man ruling the Continent. There was pride in that attitude – being the policeman of Europe. Germany was not going to become lord over Europe, just as Napoleon had to be stopped over a century earlier.

The result of World War 1 was possibly 22,000,000 dead and almost the same number wounded. Four empires destroyed – Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Turkish Empires.

All this is not to besmirch the men who died at Gallipoli or at any other time during the War. They died bravely and with honour. And they should be remembered for that. They did not fail. They rallied to what was seen as their duty and many made the ultimate sacrifice. It is those men and women whom we acknowledge today.

There were failures in leadership that led to World War 1, and there were failures of leadership throughout the War. Furthermore, the aftermath of World War 1 is still being felt over a century later. That aftermath includes the harsh Treaty of Versailles which imposed a heavy economic burden on Germany and led, twenty years later, to an even more costly war in terms of bloodshed, a war that saw one of the great blights in history – the Holocaust.

World War 1 was not a just war but it was seen as a holy war by many in leadership and among the soldiers. Sadly, that there was such slaughter during the War raised questions in the minds of many about God, especially as many religious leaders on both sides were supportive of it and encouraged men to enlist.

God's work was really cut out for Him as the English poet wrote but, in reality, I suspect that God wept for His people. He had created them, and they had sinned, and they kept on sinning, and still do today.

The one who benefitted most from World War 1 and all that has followed is Satan. It has become unpopular to mention Satan. I have heard comments that Satan is a myth. Not so. He stalks around seeking people to devour as Peter states in 1 Peter 5:8-9a. The pain, the grief, and the on-going trauma of World War 1, and all wars, is grist for Satan's mill.

Yet, all is not lost. There is still Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, we read in the opening verse:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

God was aware that humankind who He created would sin and, from that time, He set in motion the steps that led to the birth of Jesus, His Crucifixion and Resurrection. It took millennia to occur – and millennia have passed since that long ago day which we have recently commemorated. On that day, Satan was defeated but he continues to fight a rear-guard action. That is why there is so much sin in the world.

But, with Jesus, we are not alone.

In Psalm 91, we read how God is our refuge and fortress. We read that He will cover us with his feathers and find refuge under His wings. Jesus echoed these words, as we read in Matthew 23:37 –

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

Much else is written in Psalm 91 about God's protection. It is there for us, however, we must ask for that protection, and we must ask sincerely.

When I returned to the Church, now 26 years ago, it was at a time of personal and family difficulty. I was mocked by a former friend who spoke of foxhole Christians, clearly inferring that I had returned to the Church, only because I was in trouble. I was in trouble however it was not a shallow conversion. That person will never understand – not unless there is an open heart and open mind.

We must make our hearts to love and trust God. We must be sincere in our faith and trust. We must be strong in our repentance.

Then, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil: for God will be with and His rod and His staff will comfort us.

We do not know how strong the faith was of those who died on that long ago ANZAC Day and the many days of war that followed back then or in the decades since. We can only hope that they died in faith.

I will end in prayer.

*God of love and liberty,
we bring our thanks today for the peace and security we enjoy.
We remember those who in times of war
faithfully served their country.
We pray for their families,
and for ourselves whose freedom was won at such a cost.
Make for us a people zealous for peace,
and hasten the day
When nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither learn war anymore.
This we pray in the name of the one who gave His life
for the sake of the world:
Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.
Amen*

My final words are: **Lest we forget.**