

## An Anzac Day Reflection

*Interview with Rev Mark Butler*

As we come to commemorating Anzac Day, conflict and violence around the world at the moment reminds us that war isn't just something that happened in the past.

So how do we come to terms with the desire to protect ourselves and others, while facing the realities of what it means to send troops into other countries? Where is the hope for those involved in armed conflict?

Reverend Mark Butler has been a Defence Force chaplain and faced questions like this many times while out in the field. Today, we're sharing his conversation with former *Messages of hope* presenter, Richard Fox, about finding hope when faced with the realities of war.

### **Richard: What motivated you to become a Chaplain to the RAAF?**

**Mark:** Good question to start with! It's not essentially a spiritual story. It's a story of interest and I've always had an interest in aircraft and an interest in adventure and there's not a lot of avenues for clergy to explore those things and so I guess over the years as a minister I developed more and more of a keen interest in the work that military chaplains that I knew did. I never took it terribly seriously until I was invited out to a Thank You dinner put on by Defence Reserves Support Council for Heads of Churches to thank us for supporting Defence chaplaincy and at that a number of Defence Reserve chaplains spoke about their experiences. As I was driving home that night I thought, "I really think this is something where I could really express what I feel to be at the heart of ministry for me."

### **Richard: What do you mean by the heart of ministry?**

**Mark:** To be involved in faith conversations with people in helping people discover in the light of the good news of the gospel and in the teaching of Jesus what it means to live life to the fullest as God's shaped us to live it and those conversations around the meaning of faith and hope and fullness of humanity that I really longed to have with people and I saw the opportunity in the Defence Force to be involved in those with people who really because of the nature of the work that they do not only needed to have those conversations but were stimulated to have those conversations

### **Richard: So, you've been a reservist here in Australia, but you've also spent time overseas?**

**Mark:** Yes, with the Royal Australian Air Force. In 2009 I did a 4-month rotation as part of Operation Slipper which is the Australian response to the International

Coalition Against Terrorism, so I was the Chaplain to the air component - all Royal Australian Air Force personnel within the theatre of both Iraq and Afghanistan and places in between.

**Richard: As a Christian chaplain what's been the most important aspect of your faith in Jesus in a military context?**

**Mark:** The most important aspect of Jesus' teaching that impacts upon what I would want to be able to model and say in my role as a Chaplain in the Defence Force is the inherent value of the human person. Now I would add, theologically, as a creation of God - even if that's not something I might always add to the sentence when I'm talking with people but that people are valuable and that people live best when they are compassionate or passionately concerned for the wellbeing of the other. Or you know, when we do for others as we would have them do unto you. Those very simple, but profoundly foundational teachings of Jesus have as significant an application in a defence world or in a war fighting world as they do anywhere else and I see a lot of quality young people in our defence forces committed to doing what is right and fair and standing up for people who can't stand up for themselves, which is very often why they are in the job they are in.

**Richard: Regardless of whether they are Christian or have a different belief? They are the foundational things?**

**Mark:** They are, but they are foundational for me as a Christian Minister and a Pastor and a Chaplain, because they were foundational to the teaching of Jesus. Jesus said everything else in scripture hangs on this commandment - *Love God with everything you've got and love your neighbour as yourself* - and so for me that's the non-negotiable of being a human being and if I can by example instil that by modelling it, talking about it, encouraging it in my role as a Chaplain then the soldiers and sailors and airmen and women and officers that I associate with can be part of the circle of influence that I have, then we will have a better air force!

**Richard: Does the question ever come up about the conflict between loving your neighbour as yourself and yet, as military, sometimes having to take life?**

**Mark:** Look, that is always a tension and my greatest fear is that there will be a day when that doesn't become a tension any longer because I think that for all people of faith and, I'll speak as a Christian, for Christians in the defence force we constantly need to be holding those two things in tension and not losing the balance. But I will say this, that the world we live in is a broken world and as part of that brokenness there are people who will enact violence against others in order to achieve an outcome, people who will use power in a way that is unjust against powerless people or people with less power, people who by virtue of a desire for greater gain will harm others. And if we are to truly take seriously Jesus' call to stand with and be in companionship with those who are the least and the lost - sometimes that means having to fight for them and that becomes very real when you're a member of a mentoring task force on the ground in Afghanistan and

you're trying to help a village gain some basic rights like education or clean water or whatever and you're doing your very best to protect them against people who, for whatever unimaginable reason, wish to come in and harm them, kill them, mistreat their vulnerable people... so loving neighbour then does become very raw and sometimes means having to take up a weapon and defend those who can't defend themselves.

**Richard: Mark, Australia has a well trained and experienced defence force but are there still times in the field where there's a sense of not being in control?**

**Mark:** Very much so. Part of the reality of the kind of environment that we are now finding ourselves in as a Defence Force overseas is that it's a very fluid, unpredictable environment that you can try and plan for - but every time you do, your plan will be interrupted and so the sense of being out of control is very real for a lot of people and particularly more so for those young men at this stage, and some women too, but mainly young men who find themselves in the front line and in direct danger from small arms fire and improvised explosive devices and all the things that are currently used by extremists to exact damage on people. The unpredictability and lack of mastery over that environment are two things that really chip away at the human psyche.

**Richard: And what relevance does Jesus have in that kind of situation?**

**Mark:** Having a sense that whatever happens the healing presence of God is part of that, for me was something that sustained me. I know it sustained a lot of other people of faith that I spoke to, both from our particular group but also among the American and British personnel that we shared services with on the base and things like that. I guess in some ways part of being a Chaplain present with our personnel in that sort of a situation is kind of to be a reassurance to them that there is this something otherness of life however they might try and describe it. That is there too, that is about healing and care and comfort and hope. And I love Father Mulcahey in MASH - who's kind of a model chaplain in many ways - and he said that chaplains bring humanity into the midst of inhumanity and so is a figure that reminds people that there is something other in the situation that is about hope and stability and compassion and a presence of healing in their lives. And so even though people might not necessarily articulate in the way that I would as a Christian being a chaplain in the midst of our personnel and they find themselves in those situations and our army chaplains do it very, very, very well because they are right there with them in the tough stuff. The ability to be that presence of humanity in the midst of inhumanity to whom the troops can look and see a presence for hope, almost that priestly presence is I think really important.

**Richard: When Anzac Day comes around, what thoughts run through your mind?**

**Mark:** I guess that great dichotomy between a sense of wanting to genuinely honour and show deep respect for those who've had the courage to agree to be placed in harm's way for the sake of protecting those who are unable to protect themselves or for fighting for a value or a principle that they hold dear - a deep respect for that - and also a remembering of the horror and futility of war, and so

my personal reflections on Anzac Day are always that sense of wanting to be honouring and respecting of all who are prepared to fight for what is right, and at the same time a sense of personal hope that one day that's never going to have to be something anybody has to consider again and that maybe as a human race, through the work of the Holy Spirit we might learn to live in peace and work out our differences in a way that doesn't require violence because war is, at its very base character, horrific, futile, cruel, and contrary to God's will for this great creation and so if we can all sort of make a personal commitment on Anzac Day to live peacefully, particularly with those we don't agree with and be committed to praying for a world that lives that way then I think that Anzac Day is one of those days where we can take stock and be reminded of the need to be committed to that. I hope that ANZAC Day continues to be something that is engaged more and more by younger people and it seems to be the case. That's wonderful but I hope the outcome of that is new generations that are determined to find better, more humane ways of dealing with conflict and problems. Both at a personal level within homes, communities and globally.

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