ANZAC Day. The centenary of the landing at Gallipoli when Australians and New Zealanders and servicemen from other countries went ashore at the Gallipoli Peninsula.

Isn’t it typical that something so precious as ANZAC Day has been commodified, with advertising campaigns from ‘fresh in our memory’ to t-shirts and beanies and stubby holders. Surely this does a disservice to those whose lives were ended so tragically at Gallipoli, and to those who lived with the nightmares of that troubled landscape where casualties were so great in number. All of the attempts to break through the Turkish lines ended in failure. Indeed, the Turks also failed to drive the allied troops off the peninsula, and there was a stalemate that continued for the remainder of 1915. Eight long months. The most successful operation of the campaign was the evacuation of the troops in mid December under cover of a clever and comprehensive deception plan.

The ANZAC legend has taken on a special significance at the heart of the Australian story. But perhaps the mythology has taken on a life of its own, and actually fails to honour the men whose real stories need to be told. People like the men and women on the WW1 Honour Rolls here at Pilgrim Church (formerly Stow Memorial Congregational Church) and Pirie Street Methodist Honour Board, whose stories have been researched by Marilyn Hyde and Pat Button and now are no longer simply names on a board, but real people with stories of their own.

Many of them enlisted to defend the Empire. Others had simply set off for adventure, like the last living ANZAC Alec Campbell who was quoted in the NY Times at the time of his death in 2002 at the age of 103 as saying: ‘I joined for adventure. There was not a great feeling of defending the Empire. I lived through it, somehow. I enjoyed some of it. I am not a philosopher. Gallipoli was Gallipoli’.

On the first day of the Gallipoli campaign, April 25th, 747 ANZACs lost their lives. The deaths continued, including my great uncle Louis Paul Kau, also known as Leslie Wright, who died on May 2nd at Gallipoli. And to tell the bigger picture, 8,000 ANZACs died at Gallipoli, and, alongside them, 86,000 Turks had been killed. And yet, no ground had been gained on either side. An Australian soldier who was there said "it was the absurd sacrifice of young men by old men sitting in stuffed chairs in London”, seeking to protect British interests in the Middle East and the Suez canal. The bonds of empire were strong, but the campaign itself was ill conceived.

The world has mixed feelings about war — always has, always will. I wonder why it is that failure is not embraced as one of the sobering lessons from Gallipoli, in a way that cautions us about war. Not to dishonour those who have offered their service and their lives in this or any other war efforts, but that cautions us that the arena of war holds death and destruction and grief and weeping, even as it seeks to achieve an outcome of peace. And the casualties of war continue on long after the battles are concluded, with the experience of returned soldiers and their families and communities, with ongoing despair and trauma, substance abuse and alcoholism, and suicide.

The appropriate response to war is not celebration but lament. Lament for each time that the possibility of peace is fractured, or discarded. Lament for each time small and large hostilities are allowed to be fanned into flame. “Lament is a cry to God. Lament is the cry of those who see the truth of the world’s deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are.”
(Emmanuel Katangole and Chris Rice, Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing (Resources for Reconcilation, p. 78)

To lament, we must stop, and set aside our busyness, and notice the current state of things, the conflict and the chaos in the world, allowing it to sit heavy in our spirits. To take time to allow positivity and optimism to fall away, to recognize reality, and then to allow a rooted hopefulness to grow in the face of despair.

It could be said that the legend of ANZAC has been manipulated for political and national interests, a way of claiming strength and resilience despite adversity, particularly in the wake of 9/11. A way of embedding courage, endurance and tenacity, mateship, courage, and loyalty as part of our national character. An appropriation of the spirit of ANZAC which was suggested by official war historian C.E.W. Bean to have ‘stood for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship and endurance that will never own defeat.' I wonder what it would do our nation’s soul to own defeat - rather than deify it, to stare it in the face, and to rise above it?

It could also be said that facts have been conveniently overlooked or misconstrued to contribute to this ANZAC mythology, including Alan Bond’s infamous declaration after the historic 1983 America’s Cup win as ‘the greatest Australian victory since Gallipoli’. Bruce Scates, writing in The Age, says ANZAC Day is ‘a failure in the way we remember. It is a festival of forgetting. It is disrespectful to those who died and the families who loved them not to condemn the waste and madness of what began and ended as pointless folly’.

Writers and politicians in Australia and elsewhere have been complicit in developing the ANZAC mythology, claiming that the landing at Gallipoli was the making of a nation, the moment that defined the national identity and character - even though it ended in withdrawal rather than victory. The mythology around ANZAC Day has come to hold a truth of its own.

And yet, the ANZAC story is not a legend, nor is it one story. Rather, it is built on the stories of individuals, for the ANZAC story is the tapestry of all those stories of all those men, real men, many barely old enough to be considered men, some not even men but boys with big dreams and ambition, with their hopes and dreams alive, and their enthusiasm brimming over as they set off on those ships to those far horizons.

The landscape of Australia may well have had a part to play in shaping the spirit of the ANZACs. Retired Colonel Arthur Burke writes: ‘In the early days, settlements were scarce and far apart yet pioneers built our society's foundations in these fragmented tiny communities. The sun and the open land, the independence and the freedom of living under these conditions was a flame in the blood of our pioneers, a flame that burns whenever people are free, wherever there is a spirit which is willing to help those in need. If there were rumours of trouble, immediately someone would saddle a horse and ride off to see if they could help. For a century they had been helping overcome nature's curses and supporting each other's causes. Now they were equally ready again to assist Britain’. And in this spirit, they responded to the call for help, offering their services, committing their lives. And they fought as they lived - bravely, openly, independently, and without fear.

The courage and valour of these young Australian soldiers forged their reputation as brave soldiers who cared for their mates. As well, their values of mateship, courage, resilience, and determination were shaped by the fiery crucible of war They demonstrated the value of sacrifice, the value of standing firm against the odds, the value of integrity and the value of courage.

But it is their story, and these are their particular values demonstrated in the harshest of conditions. I do wonder how we have the audacity to claim these characteristics as, by osmosis, defining our national character one hundred years later. Oh, may we see the day when our nation - our leaders and citizens - show the same commitment and courage and sacrifice in decision making to seek the common good in our time.

Let the stories of these men - and their families - teach us about hope, and courage, about sacrifice, about loss, about grief. And then may their stories convict us to follow the pathways of peace, wherever that takes us, whatever the cost. May their lives make us long for the freedom which had been kindled in them as pioneers in the wide brown spaces of this vast land, and which shaped the strength, vitality and endurance of their character. May we lay down our lives in service to this vision, to build bridges of reconciliation, to foster mutuality, respect and understanding. May we remember and commit ourselves to peace, justice and reconciliation throughout our world.

Thus may we honour the sacrifice of their lives with our own commitment. May it be so. Amen.