

MH17 MEMORIAL SERVICE – CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL NEWCASTLE
SERMON DELIVERED BY DR PETER STUART
THE ASSISTANT BISHOP OF NEWCASTLE – 7 AUGUST 2014

I only remember in passing the story of Andrew McCauley the Australian kayaker who on 9 February 2007 made a distress call while travelling to New Zealand. McCauley, an adventurer, was attempting to cross from Australia and sent these fateful words, “I’ve got an emergency situation ... my kayak’s sinking ... I’m going down.” His body was never recovered though his kayak was found; a single tragedy echoing in a family, families and communities.

I have been reacquainted with Andrew’s story through the haunting lyrics and music from Australian composer Paul Jarman. Jarman explores a number of themes in his work; the dominant being captured in the title of the piece, “Towards Infinity”. He writes and choirs sing “I am riding beyond these waves towards infinity” and as the words “towards infinity” are repeated in an echoing refrain we are engaged in an image of death and dying as moving into a rich experience and new adventure beyond the amazing tapestry of life that we know and commonly experience.

Another theme in the piece is the invitation to continued life for those left behind by death. The voice of the departed is captured in a message sung by the choir, “Don’t you wait for me. Don’t you cry for me.” Words that are almost too hard to hear as this and all tragedies are made real for us in music.

I have no idea what faith perspective Jarman shares but his words resonate with the deep hope of humanity expressed in many religions and philosophies that death is not the end. He captures the human journey, of finding a way of putting one foot

after the other, as we yearn for some halting ways of trying to live again beset with grief.

As a Christian, I carry with me the hope of heaven. The abiding sense that when this life is over we journey towards the infinity of the deeper reality at the heart of the universe. We take our place in the life of the One who does not faint or grow weary, who has called us by name and knows the number of hairs on our head. We find ourselves amidst perfect love at the heart of God where we are known and know others. I claim the hope of eternity from Jesus who in dying and living offered new life to all creation and invited people to begin that life now.

As many of us were waking up on July 17 we were confronted with the news that a passenger aeroplane had been mistaken for something else above a theatre of civil war. It had been shot down and all lives had been lost. Since then we have been appalled that the ravages of the grasp for power and territory has meant that the remains of those who have died have not been able to be cherished. Already alert to a world of terror and torture, we have been further awakened to the inability of humans to live lives of love and peace across the globe. And, amidst all of this, we have been deeply moved by the images of grieving parents and families waiting to receive back into their care their beloved dead. As a nation and members of a global community we resolutely stand with them.

I claim the hope of heaven today and commend those who have died into the hands of God who loves all that he has made. I pray that they may know the fullness of life, love and peace in Him. I pray for those who mourn that travelling through the darkest of valleys they may know they are not alone. I pray that the deepest love, in which the heartbeat of God is found, may surround them.

For Christians, the Christian hope of heaven is based in the witness of Jesus. He taught that the life of heaven can be known on earth if children, women and men are prepared to embrace the way of God summed up in the great commands “to love God and love your neighbour”. Our deepest lament, as a world community, must be that we are still so far from this way. The tragedy we are here to mourn is beset with humanity’s incapacity to honour the life, needs, hopes and opportunities of others. It is a tragedy repeated daily on too many continents.

There is no innate good in the cutting short of so many lives. Such devastation is contrary to the way of God. No loving purpose has been served by such action. Yet, as we piece ourselves together in the wake of what we have seen, we can commit ourselves to work, enemies and friends, to make the world a better place. To set our sights on a way of living where justice and peace are known by all peoples.

In the work “Towards Infinity”, Paul Jarman seeks to capture the spirit of the adventurer who inspired his writing. He uses the refrain “horizons are never too far, oceans never too wide”. As we wrestle with the task of making God’s way truly known on earth, I pray that we might not be daunted or terrified but courageous and adventurous in claiming a better way for all people such that we can see an end to the grief and torment we hold in our hearts and minds today.

May those who have died know the presence of God, may those who loved them dearly be comforted and may we all be resolved to work for a better world. **Amen.**