

Bridges over Troubled Waters

Imagine all the people living life in peace... (John Lennon)

On my daily walk, I sometimes cross a footbridge over a river. Named Anzac Bridge, it tells me that we Australians are proud of our warriors who supported others fighting for peace and justice, however I might hate war. It also reminds me of experiences and memories of other bridges I have crossed.

In 2000, I walked across the **Princes Bridge** in Melbourne with thousands of people seeking reconciliation, respect and ongoing rights for our indigenous brothers and sisters in our mutual homeland. The struggle still continues in hope.

Another time, I walked across the post-war **Bridge over the River Kwae Yai** in Thailand with my adult Thai civil -servant English students. We faced the grim reality of the history of this bridge during the Second World War where numerous Asians and Allied prisoners- of- war built the river in extreme danger, tragically from Allied bombs, as well as the hatred and fear of the Japanese army. For the Japanese were desperate to open a military transport line from Bangkok to Rangoon, Burma.

When we were there the tranquil countryside told a story of survival and reminded me of Dr "Weary" Dunlop, such a "solid rock" to despairing POWs.

Another sudden flashback reminds me of a visit to Tasmania, where I saw an extraordinary engineering feat in the famous **Richmond Bridge**, a sandstone arch over the Coal River. This extraordinary engineering feat was hand-built by early convicts who were punished severely by the English- mostly for what we would consider minor offences today. A memorable artwork commemorating the gifts of these broken people!

Suddenly, I am now in a car swiftly moving from the CBD across **Sydney Harbour Bridge** to a northern suburbs' destination. Below is a panoramic view of inlets and suburbs of diverse populations. Sydney is famed world-wide for this bridge icon. Tourism would describe this bridge as the gateway to a natural playground for relaxed adventures such as scenic tours, sailing, swimming and diving. But Sydney can also promise new life and hope for idealists and dreamers- a bridge between what is and what might be.

Simon and Garfunkel's song, **Bridge over Troubled Water**, was my symbol when I was working with the Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees who came to our shores in the 70s.

Troubled water spoke of their suffering, loss, helplessness and hopelessness through betrayal by their own people as they sought peace in strange countries.

They found it in the hospitality and loving welcome of unselfish, generous people who knew how privileged they were to live with comparative security and shelter.

Later in Thailand in the 80s, I was to stand on the Thai side of the **Bridge of Aranyaprathet** with UN peacekeepers. It was blockaded at the time, as the Khmer Rouge held Cambodia and the Vietnamese military began fighting to free the Cambodian people. The bridge had

been the tragic escape route of many Cambodians in Pol Pot's war as they fled into Thailand. As I witnessed border tensions and the presence of numerous voluntary locals and foreigners assisting in refugee camps in the late 80s, I saw peace at work in the fallout from evil.

Wherever we encounter bridges there are stories of opposing forces and hopeful visions of the future. However, for those who seek peace, bridge-building becomes a transforming goal across differences culminating in peace and harmony.

For peace is a courageous response causing change for the better. Peace is a walk across a bridge *in the shoes of others* building paths towards reconciliation, healing from trauma, recognising creative gifts forged in suffering and promoting positive visions of freedom.

The risen Jesus stood in the midst of his disciples in their fear and loss and said "Peace be to you". The challenge for us is to move beyond the fears in our minds and hearts which can take us into timid, false, cruel or proud reactions. We can each choose fear ...or peace!

Jesus had already promised us peace which the world cannot give. (John 14). It is through the grace of prayer and so in our relationship with God, the Peace-Giver, that we become wiser and able to respond in action for peace in our own circumstances.

Who helps to reconcile differences? Who leaps trustingly into a fearsome unknown believing that in spite of all evidence, all will be well?

As St Paul says in Ephesians 2, Jesus *destroyed hatred and reconciled us both to God in one body through the Cross* and in Romans 14 he reminds us *that the Kingdom of God is justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*. It is up to us to live what Jesus, bridge-builder towards peace, has already done! (800 words)

Jacinta Rice csb



Anzac Footbridge