

Reflection
26 April 2020
St Andrews on The Terrace, Wellington

Rev. Dr. Niki Francis

Luke 24: 13-35
Imagine by John Lennon

“Tears have no nationality”

Ivan Sinnaeve ‘Shrapnel Charlie’ (1953-2012)
Ypres/Ieper, Belgium

Kindness is on our minds here in Aotearoa New Zealand as our Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern exhorts us to stay home, wash our hands, be kind. How lucky we are to live in a country in which kindness is a core part of our government’s message to us.

And how we need kindness in the face of the vulnerability and grief we feel with the sudden massive change and uncertainty in our lives. Acknowledging our own vulnerability during this storm of change, can help us recognise other people’s vulnerability and acknowledge and embrace their humanity.

In the reading from Luke we heard Cleopas and his companion speak of their grief over Jesus’ death and their hope that he would return as the Messiah. John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s “Imagine”, expresses in familiar words a hope for a world that will live as one. The other day the head of the World Health Organisation Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyes tweeted, “The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us of a simple truth: we are one humanity.”

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All three are good reminders for us the day after Anzac Day, usually a day of solemn commemoration in New Zealand and Australia, which has been commemorated this year in separate bubbles around both countries.

I don’t know about you, but I feel the need for an uplifting story this week, So in honour of Anzac Day, I’ll tell you a story about kindness, hope and our one

humanity – the kindness and heartfelt generosity of a Belgian man called Ivan Sinnaeve; a story about one man who recognised our shared humanity and responded to it in a meaningful way that acknowledged our interconnectedness, and offered a sense of peace to many people around the world.

Allen and I were lucky to get to know Ivan and his wife Marie Claire Leroy while we lived in Belgium a few years ago. Allen's position at the Australian Embassy meant he played formal roles at some Anzac celebrations in Flanders. The first one we attended took place at the little town of Harelbeke where we commemorated an Australian Aboriginal soldier, Rufus Rigney. Like Māori, Australian Aboriginal men enlisted in the hope that they would be treated better when they returned home. But Rufus died in 1917 after being shot in the lung and captured by the Germans during the first battle of Passchendaele. After the war, Rufus' remains were buried in the small Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Harelbeke. In recent years a wonderful connection has developed between his Ngarrindjeri people back in Australia and the local people in Harelbeke and other areas of Flanders.

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At this ceremony at Harelbeke, we met several local people, some of whom we developed lasting friendships with. One of those was Ivan, who sadly died in 2012, and his wife Marie Claire.

Ivan was from an old Flanders family. He told us how his great-grandparents fled Ieper after the town was occupied during the First World War. After the war his great-grandparents and his grandfather, who was then a teenager, returned to find Ieper destroyed. Almost nothing was left except mud and rubble.

They worked out where their house had been by locating it in relation to the ruins of the church, and by broken china they recognised as a wedding present. They rebuilt, the family grew, Ivan was born and grew up with stories of the war, surrounded by reminders in the seemingly endless graveyards in

that part of Flanders. He became a builder but in 1991 an accident left him confined to a wheelchair with constant back pain. You would have hardly known this – Ivan was a positive person with a good word for everyone and a great sense of humour.

Since childhood he had collected the small balls of lead shrapnel from his garden and the surrounding Flanders fields, a legacy of the First World War. One year Ivan, Marie Claire and the family made a daytrip to the seaside. There, Ivan spotted toy soldiers in a shop window. He bought a mould and so it began – the work of his lifetime: making soldiers, and nurses from the old lead shrapnel.

Ivan made soldiers of every nation and regiment – all who had been through the mud and the slaughter in Flanders: New Zealand, Irish, English, French, Scottish, Welsh, Belgian, Indian, Australian, American, Canadian, South African – every nation. He made them in fine detail and painted the uniforms or regimental colours. Ivan set out to make a soldier for every one of the 55,000 soldiers who died in the Ieper salient and do not have a grave – all the names on the Menin Gate.

He made German soldiers too.

Ivan said, “tears have no nationality”. He wanted each of the soldiers returned to their homes, including the German soldiers. He made a nurse model to go with every soldier or group of soldiers, to care for them on their journey, he said. He said “the lead that once killed soldiers, is now moulded into new soldiers who can travel back to their home countries to tell people never to forget what happened here and bring a message of peace.”

Ivan did all this in his and Marie Claire’s small house in Ieper. During winter when it was too cold to work in his garden workshop, Ivan worked in their tiny kitchen. Marie Claire had painted a line across the floor – Ivan worked one

side and Marie Claire prepared their meals on the other side. There was no crossing the line!

Visitors came from all over the world to see Ivan's work and take soldiers and nurses home. A Canadian visitor who had problems with pronouncing Ivan's Flemish name, nicknamed him "Shrapnel Charlie".

Ivan gave Allen and me a set of Australian soldiers and a nurse to take back to Australia. I gave one of the soldiers and a nurse to a friend whose grandparents, a digger and a nurse, had met on the Western Front at Flanders. Ivan gave me a New Zealand soldier, in the familiar lemon squeezer hat, in memory of 5 of my maternal great-uncles who served with the New Zealand expeditionary Force at Gallipoli, Flanders and Palestine.

Ivan said he coped with his constant pain by thinking of the soldiers in the freezing cold Flanders mud, often hungry, ill and living in fear. He made the models, not only from shrapnel, but also from a deep well of love and kindness. He never sold them. He gave them as gifts and sometimes people would contribute money to buy paints or other materials.

What a remarkable story of humanity, kindness, generosity and love! Ivan did not differentiate between soldiers who fought to save his country and those who, at the orders of politicians and generals, fought to conquer it. In his own pain, he was able to recognise the humanity of all, and to respond to it with his own humanity.

Ivan grew up in the Flanders landscape surrounded by massive war cemeteries and battle sites. Through his work, he acknowledged our interconnectedness and humanity and made it real, symbolically returning the soldiers to their homes, and thereby bringing some peace to the tens of thousands of people who received them.

I hope this story uplifts you in the way it uplifts me.

I would like to finish with a poem by US poet Wendell Berry because I think it reflects Ivan's work:

*The Real Work*

It may be that when we no longer know what to do  
we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go  
we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

If we haven't already found it, may we find our real work, and may we, like Ivan and Jesus before him, use it to enlarge the lives of others through love and compassion.

Amen