

In August 2013 I set off from Heathrow to go via Brisbane to the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific. There are about a thousand Islands, but I only visited about 4

The purpose was to meet Bishops and Archbishops, visit communities and Theological colleges and to explore what might be possible for our sister veronica, (in view of her eventual possibility of return) as a woman priest in a country where women aren't ordained.

It was a privilege to go there, to receive their warm hospitality and share their lives for a short while

One of the highlights on the capital Island of Guadal Canal was a hill called TNK

The top of the hill provided a view of 360' rotation – a true panorama.

TNK I think is an abbreviation in local language for hill of prayer

And there at the top of the hill was what could only be described as a small village. There were some traditional buildings of bamboo walls and banana leaf roves but mostly the buildings – a dozen or so of them in all were of a wooden construction with tin roof

And there in that small community lived the novitiate of the Community sisters of the community of the church.

Their drinking and bathing water was collected from the roofs of the buildings into big storage tanks.

Their kitchen had a roof but no walls and simple cooking was done in there with an oven made from large loose boulders in which the food was buried and a fire lit beneath.

The chapel was pretty much open – low walls and a roof, with a couple of friendly dogs wondering in and out during the worship which happened several times a day

There were 30 – 40 or so women there who were either sisters or novices who were given to a life of singing, praying, hospitality, and horticulture

The hill was also home to several pigs who were destined eventually for that oven, once one of the nearby Franciscan brothers had visited the sisters in order to dispatch brother pig

The hill was also a beautiful garden of lilies, orchids, hibiscus and other exotic plants which were native to this Solomon Island paradise and which had been nurtured, together with many vegetables by the sisters

And the hill was special. Because it was theirs, it was high, safe, not easily accessible from all angles because of difficult terrain, unfriendly topography and a single track very bumpy road

As someone who is interested in old machines it didn't take me long to notice curious items around the approach to and the gardens of TNK

There were huge wheels, parts of tanks and rusted out large gun vehicles

When I enquired why It was explained to me that this huge hill was not a naturally occurring piece of landscape – it had been built – scraped together and heaped up by the Americans and Allied forces in WW2 as a high and safe place for allied combatants in the battle for Australia against the Japanese.

The local Island men in grass skirts were known as coast watchers or scouts. They had keen eyes and kept a look out, warning the allied forces nice and early of Japanese warship and air movement

It wasn't really a Solomon Islands war, but it was fought on their islands and beaches, and the success of the campaign in defeating the Japanese in this area was pivotal in bringing the war to an end

So there is horror in the story. And loss of life. The blood of allied troops and that of the aggressors stained red the sand and the water of the beaches of Guadal Canal

And that hill with its purpose of looking out for the aggressor and being ready ....

.....still today has tanks and guns and aero plane propellers and parts littering the gardens and just too heavy for the sisters to move are a reminder to us of the appalling cost of war in terms of human life and world resources

We don't have to be a pacifist to agree that war is a terrible thing.

And even a pacifist can see the need to resist evil rather than acquiesce with it or surrender to it without a fight or resistance of some sort.

And what we can all agree is that freedom is something we

celebrate and to which we are immensely grateful to those who protect our freedom and our safety in wartime and in peace time, often at incredible cost to themselves and the loved ones they leave behind. We will remember them

But Just lets think again for a moment about that hill

It stands as a monument to the atrocities of aggression, the service of the allies, and the horrors and incredible cost of a war

And **today** it is called the hill of prayer – a home for singing nuns hanging garlands around the necks of their honoured guests, growing beautiful orchids and hibiscus flowers, praying for our world and serving our world in any way they can in Gods name

And It has truck me again how amazing it is that a hill of war can become a hill of prayer, agriculture and devotion to humanity

/////In our own lives we sometimes build hills – so that we can have the high ground, so that we can fend off aggressors. And maybe sometimes such hills are necessary. Its certainly a natural thing for us to be inclined to do

There is a time for war, `I am convinced. Evil must not win the day. The innocent should not suffer, children should be protected. National interests cant just be taken away. We sometimes need to speak, out, to take action

And there is sometimes a time for aggression ore resistance on the personal level too

And there is a time for peace. A time to let go of old enmities

TNK The Hill of Prayer is a hill of Remembrance – the machinery is a reminder of what happened there. And we must never forget.

But now, there, it is time for the hibiscus, the orchid, the cabbage, the banana, the novitiate. A new beginning in so many ways

We all have our personal war hills. But all too often they stay war hills for a long time after they are really needed.

- That sibling we haven't spoken to for years.
- That former lover spouse we can't forgive.
- Those impossible, inconsiderate neighbours who upset us
- recently or years ago,
- the person who said this or that,
- the one who did something or other,
- the one who we can never trust again,
- the one who got more than his fair share,
- the one who took something that should have been ours.
- And we have been sat on that hill of aggression unyielding in our story of having been wronged and as miserable as sin and awkward as hell ever since

What about those hills in our lives?.....

..... – the sisters taught me that it is possible to change them into

- hills of prayer,
- hills of gentleness
- and self giving.
- And innocent laughter

- Hills where garlands of flowers can be hung around the necks of former aggressors,
- where old enemies can meet and eat together,
- be fed watered, entertained and loved
- and learn to trust again

TNK, the hill of Prayer is for me an icon of hope.

It stands as an icon to all the possibilities that are there when having made our point, fought the fight, it is time to create something new

That would be great in our world, a world at war at so many levels and so many hill sot build and watches to be made. And we as individuals can feel powerless

But we can be powerful at the individual level. Jesus makes our own forgiveness possible, and brings love and grace and fellowship. Generosity, endless new beginnings.

Maybe there is one hill of war in your life that it is time to change into a hill of prayer and to make this year not the hill of aggression and old enmities remembered

But with someone in your life to make this the year of the hill of the orchid, the hibiscus, the hill of tropical paradise, the hill of prayer, of new beginnings.

The year in which we rename our own personal hill and put it to a better purpose