

Remembrance – Woodbine Willie

The reputation of Church of England chaplains in the First World War was not high. In the first place, they tended to be posh, and usually related to the officers better than the men. In the second place, the way they talked about God often seemed incredibly remote from the horror of what was happening in the trenches. And in the third place, at the start of the war especially, the Church was very much felt to be in league with the armed forces and politicians in virtually blackmailing men to join up.

A Vicar of my last parish, a man called Henry Hall, who was Vicar of Eltham from 1907 to 1942, was a good example of the typical chaplain on all three counts. He was certainly posh. If you read his parish magazine letters from the early days of the First World War you can't miss the patronizing tone, nor the way he talks about the war as if it was a Christian Crusade, or a jolly jape. He was also alarmingly keen to recruit the men of the parish. "There are still too many young men" he writes, "who have not yet joined the noble struggle. If you fail your country now you shall be looked upon as cowards and outcasts". In an even more outrageous piece of blackmail, he tried to get at the men through the women: "Maidens of Eltham" he writes. "You are our best recruiting sergeants. Have nothing to do with the faint hearts that do not deserve to win fair lady!"

Hall volunteered to go out to Gallipoli in 1915. Even at the point of leaving he was still writing letters full of patriotic enthusiasm, all gung-ho to go and get the Hun in the name of God. But it was the last time he wrote that way. As soon as he arrived at the front the letters show a dramatic change of tone:

Each night we are under heavy gun fire and every day we are shelled. The landing was awful - men and officers shot down in shoals, hundreds caught dying on the wires - killed, wounded, drowned. This is the most appalling thing imaginable.

The real experience of war changed Henry Hall and led him to found a chapel in Eltham, not as a reminder of the glory of war, but the sacrifice and pity of it. What he saw at Gallipoli, and thousands of others like him on other fronts, put a stop to all the romanticizing nonsense, and faced them with the disgusting reality of what war actually meant.

Experience also made a difference to the way people talked about God. Henry Hall was no theologian, but other chaplains were; and they were forcibly confronted with sharp questions about what this war meant. What kind of God lets such horrors happen, and how does God relate to them?

My favourite First World War chaplain - who was also, I think, one of the greatest priests the Church of England has produced - was Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, better known as Woodbine Willie. He got the nickname because when he went round the trenches he would stuff his pockets with Woodbines, these cheap cigarettes, so as to have something to offer the men.

Studdert Kennedy started out fairly posh, from a wealthy Northern Irish family, but from his student days on he was regarded as a dangerous socialist - not because he talked about politics, but because he talked about poverty and justice. He also made it abundantly clear that he thought the war was a tragic, unnecessary mistake.

So not surprisingly he was never popular with the establishment; which is why, even though he was the best preacher of his day, and after the war did more than anyone to get ordinary people back to the church, he was never promoted beyond being a Vicar.

Studdert Kennedy would have hated Henry Hall, at least, as he was before Gallipoli. He couldn't bear the usual guff about dying for God, King and Country. It was all too easy, too pat. A lot of his thoughts he put into poems - well, doggerel, really, but still quite powerful doggerel. At the start of the war he wrote one poem about the usual sort of army chaplains. He hated them because they always implied that the war was God's will, and even that God himself was sitting up in heaven controlling it:

Preachers talk of God in heaven , and I curse them to their face.
Puny, petty minded priestlings prate of providence and grace,
Platitudinously pious far beyond all doubts and fears,
They all patter of God's mercy that will wipe away our tears.

Yet their speech is drowned by sobbing as I hear the whole world
groan,
And I see a million mothers sitting weeping all alone.
And I hate this God of power on his hellish heavenly throne
Who looks down on rape and murder, and hears little children moan.

For Studdert Kennedy it was a blasphemy to suggest that God was sitting impassively above all this horror in heaven, or was in any sense controlling it. The only kind of God he could believe in, or that he could talk about to the men in the trenches, was one who was down there in the middle of it with them:

God, the God I love and worship, reigns in sorrow on the Tree,
Broken, bleeding but unconquered, very God of God to me.
All that showy pomp of splendour, all that sheen of angel wings,
Was but borrowed from the baubles that adorn our earthly kings.

It's above all in the horror of the cruel death God died
That he bids us seek his glory, as an outcast crucified.
On my knees I fall and worship that great Cross that shines above,
For the real God of heaven is not Power, but power of Love.

Studdert Kennedy was an incredibly brave man. He didn't care where he went in the midst of battle to patch up the wounded or give them Communion or bury the dead, and it made a huge

impression. At the end of the war he was awarded the MC. And he was also incredibly humble. He hated the name Woodbine Willie because he saw it as a reproach. He felt that all too often he'd given men cigarettes when what they really wanted was an answer to their endless question "why"; and for all his struggles to give an answer, he always felt he failed. Near the end of his life he wrote a poem called "Woodbine Willie":

They gave me that name like their nature
Compacted of laughter and tears.
A sweet that was born of the bitter,
A joke that was torn from the years.

That name. Let me bear it. The symbol
Of unpaid, unpayable debt.
For the men to whom I owed God's peace
I put off with a cigarette.

But the people who knew him knew he hadn't failed. Thousands of people followed his coffin at his funeral in 1929, and tens of thousands more at memorial services up and down the country. It was said that he was more mourned than the King. It was as if he showed them the reality of God precisely because he was so tormented by the same questions that faced them. He was painfully honest about his own questions and doubts; yet at the same time it was absolutely clear to those who knew him that the love of God was shining in him far more clearly than in anyone else they'd ever known. And I think that's because the one thing Studdert Kennedy always clung on to was his total conviction that whatever suffering human beings undergo or inflict on each other, the cross means that God shares in all of it; and not just 2000 years ago, but now, he still goes through it with us and can still somehow bring us through suffering to victory.

Later on, during and after the Second War, German theologians in particular developed what was said to be a new theology of the suffering God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that 'only a suffering God can save', and argued that the Church should abandon its traditional doctrine of divine impassibility – the doctrine that God can't suffer; Juergen Moltmann wrote a famous book called 'The Crucified God' in response to the horrors of the holocaust. But Studdert Kennedy had reached exactly the same conclusion years before them, as he doled out his Woodbines in the trenches:

How could it be that God could reign in glory
Calmly content with what his will has done,
Reading unmoved the piteous shameful story,
All the vile deeds men do beneath the sun?

Are there no tears in the heart of the eternal?
Is there no pain to pierce the soul of God?
Then would he be a fiend of hell eternal,
Beating the earth to pieces with his rod.

Father, if Christ is truly thy Revealer,
truly the first Begotten of the Lord,
Then MUST thou be both Sufferer and Healer,
Pierced to the heart by sorrows of the sword.

Then MUST it mean, not only that thy sorrow
smote thee once upon the lonely tree,
But that today, tonight, tomorrow,
Still it comes, O Suffering God, to Thee.

So: Bread of thy Body give me for my fighting,
Give me to drink thy sacred Blood for wine,
While there are wrongs that need me for the righting,
Let my poor struggles find their strength in thine.

Give me for light the sunshine of thy sorrow
Give me for shelter the shadow of thy cross,
Give me to share the glory of tomorrow
When endless joy of Love shall triumph o'er Love's loss.