

## REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 2021

DEAR LOVING HEAVENLY FATHER - HELP US REMEMBER HOW DIFFERENT IT WAS FOR MEN AND WOMEN DURING THE WAR. HELP US TO REMEMBER WHAT THEY GAVE UP SO THAT WE MAY ENJOY PEACE TODAY. AND HELP US HONOUR THEIR MEMORY BY OUR LIVES, NOT MERELY OUR WORDS. AMEN.

I always remember my grandmother talking about her brother - my great uncle - who was running across no man's land towards the German trenches and ran past a German soldier who had been shot and who was in considerable pain, shouting desperately for water. My great uncle's brother had been killed at the age of 18 a few weeks earlier at the battle of the Somme. So my uncle was in no mood to stop and help this German soldier in pain. Sadly, another British soldier did stop to give some water a few seconds later, and both that kind man and the German were then killed by a shell. He lived with the guilt of that for the rest of his life. Whilst sometimes war is tragically unavoidable to halt the march of evil, there is so much about war that can be just senseless, unfair and brutal.

Today is a day of remembering: one of the things that strikes me as we read out the roll of honour is that each death had a bigger story - of parents worrying and receiving the news they had dreaded, maybe of a young wife who had spent less than a year with her husband, maybe of a child born after his or her father had left to go to war. The roll call is a series of individual stories.

But at the same time, we also need to remember that we today enjoy an incredible level of freedom in a relatively prosperous and peaceful country. We owe that to those people.

And there are a few things we can learn too: the sense of comradeship they had, that comes from depending totally on the guy next to you to watch your back. We can learn from that in our individualistic, on-line, do what is right for me society.

But I want to share with you today two stories that I hope we will remember. Of two men who lived through the war, and who show something of God in the midst of the reality and the action of war.

The first was a WW1 chaplain, was a guy called Revd. Studdert Kennedy, affectionately known by the men as Woodbine Willie, because as troops were on the train to the front, he would walk through the carriages cheerfully handing each one a Bible from one bag and a packet of Woodbine cigarettes from another, both of which were appreciated. He was an utterly down to earth man, and they loved him.

- In the trenches, he wanted his life to show that wherever they were, God could still give them a sense of peace that might seem quite impossible. He was there in the thick of it. He was awarded the Military Cross in 1917 for running into No Man's Land and dragging or carrying back a number of wounded soldiers to safety.
- He would regularly go into No Man's Land because he wanted the soldiers to know that God was there, wherever they were. He would come across a dying person, give him a

cigarette - what he'd call a final 'gasper' - and then whisper the Lord's Prayer, whilst holding their hands through to the end, so that they didn't die alone.

Where they were, he was going to be there, reflecting the truth of today's reading, 'nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus'

One night, he went to help a working party putting up wire in front of their trench. As he was crawling out, a rather nervous Private shouted 'Who goes there?'. Woodbine Willie replied 'The church.'. The Private rather taken aback, challenged him again, 'What the heck's the church doing out here?' to which Willie replied 'It's job.' It's job was to show that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

When he died, the King sent a personal message of condolence to his wife, and on the coffin was a wreath sent by ex-servicemen with a packet of Woodbines in the middle of it.

The second was an American soldier, whose name I don't know. He is not famous.

For him, the horror of war was exactly where God did become real. He wrote a poem the night before he died in action in North Africa in 1944. Apparently, he was a thoroughly wild character and one of his comrades remembers seeing tears stream down his face as he wrote these words. They're less than refined, they're not Wilfred Owen, but I urge you to look beyond that to the transparently genuine experience he is relating

You see, God, they told me you didn't exist, And I, like a fool, believed all this.  
Last night, from a shell hole, I saw your sky, And I figured then they had told me a lie.  
I wonder, God, if you'd take my poor hand? Somehow I feel you would understand.  
Strange I had to come to this hellish place / Before I had time to see your face.  
The zero hour will soon be here / But I'm not afraid; because you are near.  
I am sure this'll be a horrible fight: / Who knows? I may come to your House tonight.  
Though I wasn't friendly to you before, / I wonder, God, if You'd wait at Your door?  
Look, I'm shedding tears, me shedding tears!  
Well, I have to go now, dear God. Goodbye / But now that I've met you, I'm not scared to die."

As we remember the incredible events of the past, the bravery, the horror, the comradeship, the waste of young life, let us be inspired to use that gift of freedom unselfishly, that we can truly honour the past in our lives, not just once a year, remembering God strangely amongst us, whatever we conceive him to be, as He was there amongst people then.