

## **Remembering the First World War**

*A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers at St Peter's Church, Wolvercote on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2014 on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War I.*

Looking back now, 100 years on, to the beginning of World War I, there is a deep irony that it was billed as 'the war to end all war' – a phrase originally coined by H G Wells in the first month of the war. Only 21 years after the end of World War I, the earth was embroiled in another huge conflict which claimed seven times as many lives; and every year since 1945, bar one, the British Army has been involved in fighting somewhere around the globe.

Nightly on our TV screens we get pictures from the Gaza strip. The destruction we see is terrifying, and the suffering, particularly of the children, heart-breaking. And of course in some respects, this is even worse than World War I – partly because of the vast increase in the destructive power of the weaponry available; but partly also because the people being killed are not armed soldiers but largely civilian, including women and children. The First World War was decidedly not 'the war to end all war'...rather one tragic and bloody chapter in the history of the human race, preceded and followed by other chapters in our inhumanity to one another. The human race consistently fails to learn the lessons of the past.

Of course, sometimes people feel they have no option but to fight. When an oppressed people have exhausted all other means, perhaps armed resistance is the only option left....Perhaps. Too often though one wonders whether every avenue really has been explored, whether there might just be some stones left unturned; ...and whether it is human – usually male – bravado which rushes us too soon into armed conflict.

In 1914, a young lad, only 16, had lied about his age to get into the army. On the way to the front he wrote: 'Ahead is the unknown - danger, hardship, wounds, perhaps death, but these possibilities leave me unmoved. I can only think of heroics, of battles won, of returning heroes, glorious deeds...This is my great adventure.'

Four days later, his tune had changed. He wrote: 'Zero day has come and gone and I have lived a hundred years. Four short days ago, I was a youngster with all the ideals of youth, but now I have changed. Everything seems different. Where we are going or what is to happen to us next, I know not and care less. It is sufficient that we are leaving that hell behind.'

His bravado had evaporated. World War I, like many wars, started with too many people strutting proudly, believing in their own rightness and power, believing in their ability to triumph and make things better. And they were brought to their knees by the reality of the hell they created. Some might say, if they had been on their knees in the first place, in prayer and humility, maybe history would have been different.

And we can imagine God looking down, agonised, crucified, thinking ‘why, why, why?’ Today is a day for sorrow, penitence and a good look at the worst human beings can be and do. It is a day for sinking to our knees and asking God’s forgiveness: ‘Lord, have mercy upon us’. ‘Lord, hear us and forgive us.’

But perhaps also on this day, on every day, we can discern something else behind the thud, thud, thud of the nails we drive into the cross: divine words of compassion. ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise.’ ‘Woman, behold, your Son.’

Another soldier wrote this: ‘My pal was mortally wounded only a yard from me. I showed him his wife’s photo and read her last letter to him, and part of St John 17, and so passed away a real Christian soldier. It was with a heavy heart and wet eyes that I left him with the snow falling on his body. All around lay dead and wounded, and I did what I could... You will gather how we suffered when I tell you that out of forty-two in our platoon, only eleven are left and I am one of them.’

Divine compassion can be ours to share even in the worst evils and deepest hell. We can see that in the United Nations workers in Gaza, in the work of peacekeepers and aid workers and medical staff...and also in the moral outrage of ordinary people at what is happening there this very day. Perhaps that outrage is one thing which we are better at, compared with 100 years ago, ...even if it does seem to such little effect.

In the darkness of the cross, there are chinks of light, love and healing. In the atrocities of war, there will always be moments of compassion, care and communion. They may seem like drops in the ocean. Yet as Christians, as people of the resurrection, we do believe and trust that every darkness, every evil, every hell is surrounded by something more powerful. God raised Christ out of death into new life, as testimony to his power over all that drains us, sucks us down, or holds us in thrall. Ultimate reality is not the messes we create, but the divine light which breaks into them.

We cannot blame Wilfred Owen and the other First World War poets for any lack of faith. We can understand why he labelled the Christian funeral rites ‘mockeries’ and why they questioned where God was in all they were experiencing. No doubt we would have done the same. Theirs is a testimony to the desolation of the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

But without lessening the awfulness of what human beings did to each other then and do to each other now, we do have a message of resurrection hope to proclaim – that by God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ, by his power not our own, humanity can be raised to higher things. Brought to our knees by the consequences of human pride, we might just find there the humility to accept God’s free and gracious offer of forgiveness in Christ, of healing and resurrection life. Let us pray today that that might be so. Amen.