

## WORLD WITHOUT END

Remembrance Sunday

Sung Eucharist

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday, November 8<sup>th</sup> 2015

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All Saints' Church in Steep nestles within that little Hampshire village beneath the chalk downland hills or 'hangers' as they are known in that part of the world. One of the real gems within Steep church is a beautiful clear glass window engraved by Lawrence Whistler, the brother of the well-known artist, Rex. Interestingly this window has its twin in the church of St. James, Eastbury in west Berkshire. Again the window is by Lawrence Whistler, and this time there's a further link, for in the far corner of the churchyard, nearest the open fields is the grave of Helen Thomas.

Helen was the widow of the poet, Edward Thomas, and the two windows I've mentioned are engraved in memory of he and Helen, his wife, respectively. Edward's grave is in Agny Military Cemetery just to the south of Arras in north east France. He was killed in April 1917 and is always described as a 'war poet' although there are few overt references to the Great War in his poetry. An exception is his short piece, *In Memoriam*:

'The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood  
This Eastertide call into mind the men,  
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should  
Have gathered them and will never do again.'

Edward Thomas started writing poetry late on in his 'literary life', encouraged by the American poet, Robert Frost. Only a handful of poems, perhaps six in all, were published before his death. He was very largely a nature poet focusing on the land, with *Adlestrop* set in a tiny Gloucestershire village, as his most anthologised piece.

Why, then, have I begun here? Well simply because Edward Thomas and a number of other poets including Wilfrid Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and even Rudyard Kipling and Thomas Hardy somehow capture both the tragedy of war and its impact upon human nature and our religious impulse. But also they illustrate in their writings this extraordinary moment of change in human culture and understanding. The Great War acted as almost a lens or prism which refocused the cultural mores of the time such that that change would never be reversed. In his poem *mcmxiv* Philip Larkin captures it thus:

Never such innocence,  
'Never before or since,  
As changed itself to past  
Without a word – the men  
Leaving the gardens tidy,  
The thousands of marriages,  
Lasting a little while longer:  
Never such innocence again.'

It echoes Edward Thomas' *In Memoriam*.

But, religion too was not left unscathed by all this. Karl Barth, one of the greatest of twentieth century theological writers would lead a fierce rebellion against the nineteenth century liberal assumption that the world was on a pathway towards inexorable progress. The dire conditions of the Flanders mud, the terrible statistics of death in the trenches – none of this could conceivably begin to support a theory of progress.

Of course, we are at this very moment, caught up into five years of almost continuous commemoration. No part of England will let it pass by. Virtually no town or village is without its war memorial and on most the Great War's list of names is by far the longest. Even at the time of the 1918 armistice, war memorials raised emotions to fever pitch. In the small north Northumberland village of Lowick, the local squire, General Sitwell, of the famous artistic family, simply had a boulder of local whinstone carved as a memorial. Three years later the locals rebelled and replaced it with a granite column surmounted by a cross covered with the names of the dead. The original memorial was 'deposed' and re-sited on the very edge of the village, just outside the entrance to the General's mansion.

But how does our faith respond to these years of commemoration, to the darkness of war. Well, of course, so many of these memorials quote – quite out of context - Jesus' words in John's gospel: 'Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.' The words stand there with a scarcely muted reference to Jesus' own passion and death.

But today's three readings offer rather different 'takes' on this solemn day of commemoration, of remembrance. The words from Micah, one of the earliest of the writing prophets, are visionary - lifting Israel's eyes from the pettiness and mundane issues which shaped the lives of many:

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord . . . for the Lord shall judge between many peoples. . . they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and the spears into pruning hooks.'

Both the second reading and the Gospel are comforting in the face of peril. For, despite all, God remains steadfast and loving; so Paul:

'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Then, our gospel began: 'Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.'

Each of these pieces forms once again a transformative theological lens or prism through which we may view the tragedy of war. The first offers a vision of a renewed humanity where war is scorned. The second two passages confirm that God's love transcends tragedy, even when war breaks out. So the lens is effectively bi-focal. War is always a sign of human failure, but that same human failure is redeemed by God in Christ Jesus.

Helen, the wife of Edward Thomas, with whom I began, wrote a beautiful biography of their life together. She called the two volumes *As It Was* and *World Without End*. The final paragraph of the second volume is heart-rending, as she bids farewell to Edward from the garden gate as he climbs the chalk downland, the 'hanger' outside Steep and immediately behind their cottage. Edward's last words to Helen were: 'Remember that, whatever happens, all is well between us forever and ever.' Helen remembers 'nothing but the mist and snow and the silence of death.' Edward's hope triumphs, however. He will not be defeated by the conflict. Up on the hillside, on Shoulder of Mutton Hill, that same hanger he climbed to go to war rests a memorial stone with just a phrase from his writings. It feels almost like a premonition of God's ultimate love:

'And, I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey.'

Today we remember the dead of two World Wars, and of so many wars since. There are only two or three years since 1945 when no British soldiers have died. The Gospel of Christ does not deny the tragedy or failures of war, but instead points to a wider vision, and a hope which can never thwarted, 'Nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Amen

Readings

Micah. 4. 1-5.

Romans. 8. 31-39.

John. 14. 1-8.