

I SHOULD LOSE NOTHING

All Souls Requiem

St Andrew Holborn

Wednesday 29th October 2014

Preacher: The Rt.Revd. Dr. Stephen Platten

More than twenty five years ago now, our greatest living ecclesiastical historian, Professor Sir Owen Chadwick, published perhaps his most important book. It was called simply *The Secularisation of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*. It charted the course of the history of ideas from the beginning of the century, with the birth of critical history – largely in Germany - to the birth of sociological analysis with Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and others. In the higher echelons of academic thought, religion seemed to be on the defensive.

However, one of the pivotal moments in the book, very near to the end, sees Chadwick as a curate in Huddersfield in 1941 –. He had been called out to a fire in a local mill. Nothing to do with the war which was raging in Europe, but everything to do with non-existent fire precautions and a tinder dry wooden building. There was a great loss of life. Chadwick returned home after midnight having spent a day with charred bodies and comforting the injured and bereaved. He noted how exhausted and wretched he felt. He opened his Prayer Book to say the evening office in the middle of that night and the reading set for the day leapt out from the page:

‘The souls of the faithful are in the hands of God and there no torment can touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died . . . but they are at peace.’

It was a powerful moment after a harrowing, terrifying day. Some seventy years later I blessed a plaque which was unveiled on the site which is now ironically a Tesco supermarket. In the light of all Chadwick had written about religion in the nineteenth century, here – nearly fifty years on – God spoke out of the abyss. Owen is still with us at the age of 96.

It is to commemorate and pray for those fifty or sixty people who died – and countless others like them - that we gather annually on the Commemoration of All Souls. For me it is one of the most moving services of the year, as one trawls through the list of those who have died in the past year. Also, as one remembers all those who have touched our lives up to this point – family, loved ones, those who have helped us on the path of faith. Frequently now clergy invite back family of those whose funerals they have conducted throughout the year.

But this year it is more than usually poignant to gather together on this evening. For, on the 4th August 1914, one hundred years ago, began a war the length and brutality of which had never been imagined in those opening months which take us up to one hundred years ago today.

So much has been written out of that conflict - novels, history and a complete oeuvre of poetry – not to mention also the music and visual art from people like George Butterworth, Ivor Gurney, Paul Nash – and so many others. But it is Philip Larkin, that rather sardonic librarian from the University of Hull, who – fifty or sixty years on - captured the dividing line which the Great War has come to represent. Here is just one stanza from Larkin:

‘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.

In three stanzas which precede that final verse, Larkin paints a sad and woeful picture of those leaving for the front – none of them imagining the horror that would follow. In the remarkable memoirs of her husband, *As It Was* and *War Without End*, Helen Thomas, the wife of poet, Edward Thomas, chronicles the moment when he closes the latch on the back gate of their cottage in Hampshire and climbs the hill disappearing into the hanger or wood atop the hill behind the cottage, never to return again.

The great outpouring of literature, film, television or web-based material this year captures the sharpness of the line in the sand drawn by the Great War. As if the nineteenth century hadn't done enough to attempt to extinguish humanity's religious impulse, surely World War One did. At the moment I'm reading *The Ice Cream War* by William Boyd about the same conflict only in East Africa. All the same resonances are there.

Yet, as Owen Chadwick saw in his lonely bachelor homecoming late that night in World War II Huddersfield, God's eternity, God's faithfulness will not be quenched even in extremis. In our gospel, we hear Jesus resonate with the words from the Wisdom of Solomon. The Wisdom writer notes: 'The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God and there no torment can touch them.' Jesus' words are these: 'For I have come. . . that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day.'

It is in Jesus, and in the dramatic turn of events of the last week of his life, leading up to his death on the cross that we see God's extraordinarily ironic, even paradoxical capacity to revise the conditions of our cosmos, of our entire experience – even of our humanity. The cruellest suffering and tragedy results in a new world. Despite the agony and sorrows of the Great War, this evening we do not celebrate some sort of stoic resignation despite it all. We celebrate instead the life of the God of Jesus Christ in its eternity - never leaving one single soul unloved but staying with them forever.

Amen

Readings:

Wisdom. 3. 1-9

John. 6. 37-46