

WHAT IS RAISED IS IMPERISHABLE!

Remembrance Sunday

St Michael Cornhill

Sunday November 9th 2014

We all will have seen some of those earliest pieces of film newsreel where everyone appears to be hurrying around at great speed; that effect was, I gather, something to do with the filmspeed and the fairly crude early machinery. One of the most powerful pieces of that sort of film that I've seen is the fifteen minutes which survive on the University of East Anglia's film archive of the funeral of Edith Cavell. Cavell died in front of a German firing squad on the 15th May 1915 – one hundred years ago next year. She had been sheltering British soldiers and was condemned to death under German civil law.

Cavell's death caused huge outcry and after the war her body was exhumed from its resting place in the prison in Belgium. Following a memorial service, she was given what was effectively a state funeral in Norwich Cathedral. She is buried beneath a simple stone cross in an area of grass to the south east of the cathedral which has ironically always been known as *Life's Green*. Cavell's father was the parish priest at Swardeston, again just south east of Norwich. As we now remember the centenary of the Great War, certain figures still fill the foreground. As a devout Anglican, Cavell was just one such person. She has become, to use a modern cliché, an icon of a courageous, devout and dedicated woman. The sentiments echoed by St. Paul in our second reading were part of what gave her that *courage* and even fashioned her life. If you remember, Paul writes:

'So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory.'

Cavell was an ordinary human being like the rest of us. She too will have had her fears, her uncertainties, her anger and her forbearance. But alongside all this, her faith in the crucified, resurrected and ascended Christ shaped her entire life. It motivated her vocation to be a nurse; it empowered her courage to save the lives of soldiers facing certain death.

The Great War has stimulated more artistic creativity than perhaps any other modern conflict. There is a huge library of poetry and a still growing store of literature in the form of novels. Sometimes these two genres even interact and flow into each other. So Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy weaves together the lives of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfrid Owen – two of the most distinguished World War One poets. Barker also weaves their lives into the stories of some of the earliest psychiatrists working on neurasthenia and post traumatic shock syndrome.

Wilfrid Owen, like Edith Cavell, was an Anglican, and despite his anger at the nature of the conflict, he never renounced his faith. It is a faith which affirms God's presence to us in eternity in life and death. It remained with Owen until his death in spite of all the traumas of the war. That first reading with its unforgettable phrase, 'The souls of the faithful are in the hands of God and there no torment shall touch them' would have been part of the emotional and devotional furniture of Owen's heart and mind

But alongside this, there is no doubting the seismic effects that the Great War had on the Christian faith. Wilfrid Owen's own faith was recast in the furnace of the conflict. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, the most famous and celebrated Anglican chaplain of the First War, known best under his sobriquet *Woodbine Willie* also found his faith reframed, metamorphosed. Studdert Kennedy also wrote poetry, what one might term as barrack room ballads. In his most famous collection, *The Unutterable Beauty*, there is some writing of great emotional power. So, in *High and Lifted Up*, he writes:

‘And I hate the God of power on his hellish heavenly throne,
Looking down on rape and murder, hearing little children moan...
... 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 starry pomp of splendour all that sheer of angels wings,
was but borrowed from the baubles that surround our earthly kings.’

The war exhausted Studdert Kennedy and he died, only fifteen years later, still just a middle aged man. By then, he had become the priest at St. Martin's, Worcester. For his funeral, as with Edith Cavell, the streets of the city were lined by row upon row of people – crowds came from well beyond the West Country.

Studdert Kennedy's example and his poetry even helped change the direction of the theology of late twentieth century. So, the German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, who had himself been in an Allied prison camp, during the Second World War, acknowledged Studdert Kennedy's influence. His most famous book is simply called *The Crucified God*. In it, he explains what it means for God to suffer in the person of Jesus. God is there – even in the most terrifying suffering of our humanity.

So, on this day, annually, we give thanks for the millions who have given their lives in war for the cause of freedom. But equally we give thanks for the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. For in Christ's own suffering we see him entering into the travails and woes of the human race for which his saving life was given. Amen

Readings:

Wisdom of Solomon. 3. 1-9.
I Corinthians. 15. 35-37, 42-44.
Luke. 20. 27-38