

The Battle of the Somme.

Last Friday was the 100th anniversary of one of the grimmest days in British history, the First Day of the Battle of the Somme. Even after a century, when all the participants are dead, the story of that day has the power to move us, and you must forgive me if I prove unable fully to control my emotions as I talk about it.

Let me remind you of the outline of events. After a week-long bombardment of the German positions near the River Somme in N. France by Allied artillery and then the blowing of 17 mines under the German trenches, the British soldiers came up out of their trenches to the north of the River and the French out of theirs to its south in order to attack the German lines. It was 7.30 in the morning on a fine summer's day as the first soldiers began their walk through no-man's land, laden with equipment that would help them to dig in when they captured the German trenches. Their march was supposed to be more or less unopposed, but in fact the Germans had been so well dug in and British shells had been of such poor quality that the bombardment had not been very effective. Scrambling up from their dugouts, German riflemen and machine-gunners, together with their artillery, found the advancing hordes unmissable targets, especially since the British had to cut their way through the German barbed wire, which the bombardment had simply bounced about instead of cutting in many places. By the close of that dreadful First Day, 60,000 British troops were casualties, 20,000 of them dead. No worthwhile objectives had been gained. It was the worst military disaster that the British have ever suffered. Fighting on the Somme continued until mid-November, but Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander, was unable to snatch victory from initial defeat. There was no breakthrough and though he hoped that the Germans were being worn down by their substantial losses, historians are mostly of the opinion that the British and French were being worn down more rapidly than their enemies. All told, the Germans might have suffered half a million casualties. Allied losses (killed and wounded) were certainly in excess of 600,000, two thirds of them incurred by the peoples of the British Empire.

It is small wonder that the Battle of the Somme has become a by-word for senseless slaughter. The men whom Haig sent into action were mostly the volunteers who had responded to the recruiting drive launched by General Kitchener in 1914. Many of them formed Pals' battalions: men from tight-knit communities who joined up en masse. On the Somme battlefield many of these battalions suffered devastating losses. A survivor of the Leeds Pals' battalion wrote: *We were two years in the making and ten minutes in the destroying.* It was bad enough when one woman in a street received the dread telegram informing her of the death in action of a son or husband. In Wakefield, Kitty Eckersley, for example, pregnant with her first child, learnt that her husband Percy had been killed. She said later: *I felt I didn't want to live. I had no wish to live at all, because the world had come to an end for me. I had lost all that I loved.* In that terrible summer of the Somme whole communities were plunged into mourning as woman after woman received such news. And imagine, if you can bear to, the grief of the faraway Newfoundlanders when the troops they had raised in the service of the Empire were virtually wiped out on that terrible First Day.

Attached to the fighting units of the British Army were army chaplains, at first mostly Anglican, later Roman Catholic and Nonconformist as well. One of their duties was to write to the closest relatives of the dead men and offer what comfort they could. Generally, they included some reminiscences of the dead soldier and then found themselves reflecting on the meaning of his death. Here is an extract from Chaplain Leonard's letter about Corporal Williamson from Manchester, who was killed in the Battle of the Somme at the age of 22. It was written to the Corporal's sister, presumably his closest living relative. *There is one comfort at least in knowing that he gave his life in a sacred cause fighting for Right and Justice. All those who have fallen on the field of honour in the war, though perhaps they know it not, are following the path of self-sacrifice and duty which their Lord Himself once trod. They are following in His footsteps and helping Him to pay the price of the world's salvation.*

I do not know for sure, but I think it quite likely that the dead corporal's sister did find solace in these words. When those close to us die prematurely, we desperately seek reassurance that their deaths are not meaningless. The Chaplain provided such reassurance by setting Williamson's death in the

context of a fight against evil in accord with God's will. Some of the chaplains themselves, however, came to question this view of the war. For one thing, the Germans they encountered did not seem like Evil Incarnate. Chaplain Studdert Kennedy, known to the men as Woodbine Willie because of his habit of handing out cigarettes as well as New Testaments to the soldiers, described himself wandering in no-man's land.

Good Lord, what's that? A dead Boche. I kicked him hard, poor little devil. He looks like a tired child that has cried itself to sleep. He looks puzzled, as if he were asking, Why me?...What had he to do with it, anyhow? Not much great blond beast about him. He couldn't hurt a decent, well-developed baby.

Most British soldiers had no difficulty in identifying the Kaiser, whom they knew of only from the newspapers, as the very devil, but the men they actually shot at could not be reduced to stereotypes or branded *unnatural beasts, human abortions, or hellish fiends*, which is how the wartime orator Horatio Bottomley described the Germans.

But above all, men like Studdert Kennedy found it hard to believe that God was somehow willing the war. The Bishop of London assured troops at Bisley in 1914: *This is a **Holy War**. We are on the side of Christianity against Anti-Christ. We are on the side of the New Testament, which respects the weak and honours treaties, and dies for its friends, and looks on war as a regrettable necessity.* Quite apart from the Bishop's doubtful interpretation of the New Testament, some men found it hard to accept this view of the war as ennobling. Listen to Siegfried Sassoon in his poem *They*:

The Bishop tells us: When the boys come back

They will not be the same; for they'll have fought

In a just cause: they lead the last attack

On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought

New right to breed an honourable race,

They have challenged death, and dared him face to face.

We're none of us the same! *The boys reply.*

For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;

Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;

And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find

A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.

And the Bishop said: The ways of God are strange.

No wonder that Woodbine Willie could find no redeeming features in a war typified by the Battle of the Somme:

Waste of Muscle, waste of Brain,

Waste of Patience, waste of Pain,

Waste of Manhood, waste of Health,

Waste of Beauty, waste of Wealth,

Waste of Blood, and waste of Tears,

Waste of Youth's most precious years,

Waste of ways the Saints have trod.

Waste of Glory, waste of God—

War!

Woodbine Willie was not alone in finding himself unable to see God's purposes being accomplished in the war. A popular wartime story told how a clergyman got into a railway carriage full of soldiers returning to the front. *So you are going to fight God's war*, he said. The ensuing silence was eventually broken by this advice. *Sir, hadn't you better keep your poor Friend out of this bloody mess?*

A vision of God as 'Disposer supreme and Judge of the earth' seemed indeed to have little relevance to those experiencing the *bloody mess* in the trenches.

But the Christian religion offers too another image of God by presenting him as revealed in the tortured and suffering Christ. Studdert Kennedy wrote:

*Father, if He, the Christ, were Thy Revealer,
Truly the First Begotten of the Lord,
Then must Thou be a Suff'rer and a Healer,
Pierced to the heart by the sorrow of the sword.*

Faced daily with suffering and death in the trenches, Kennedy could no longer relate to a God who is a remote King of Creation and Director of History, but he could find solace in him whom he called *a Comrade God*, who suffers alongside his children. Kennedy, assuming the voice of a common soldier, wrote:

*So it isn't just only the crown o' thorns
What 'as pierced and torn God's 'ead;
'E knows the feel uv a bullet too,
And 'E's 'ad 'Is touch o' the lead.*

So it was that the Battle of the Somme and the long and terrible war of which it was part impelled Studdert Kennedy and many other Christians to re-examine their faith and to re-discover the centrality of the Incarnation and the message that God understands and shares our anguish and our pain, because he too has trodden the path of suffering. *O come, O come Emmanuel*, we sing in Advent. *Emmanuel* means 'God with us'. The Good News of the Christian Gospel is that God is not remote in his heaven looking down on our suffering and grief. Our God suffers with his people. St Paul wrote that *neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come...shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*. If Paul had lived in the early 20th century, he might well have added that not even the horrors of the trenches could separate us from God's love.

