

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday – 2022

Last month, the president of the Conference of European Churches highlighted the role of the churches and religion in the pursuit of peace, especially amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. This cry for peace echoes the words of St Paul who writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, 'Stand firm, always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord'. That work of course is founded on peace. As Jesus said to his disciples 'Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you.'

After the First World War, people prayed that it would be "the war to end all wars". And for good reason. Many voices relayed the atrocities of The Great War, but one was particularly moving, in a beautiful way. It's the voice of Wilfred Owen who enlisted to fight against the enemy, and yet as a poet carried a message of warning against for the horrors of the war in his poetry.

Wilfred Owen was one of the greatest British War poets. He was killed in action at the age of 25, one week before the Armistice. When he was 18, Owen became a lay assistant to the vicar of Dunsden, in Oxfordshire. There, he assisted with the care of the poor and sick in the parish and came to understand more fully the social and economic issues of the times. He developed a sense of humanitarian work, but he became disillusioned with the inadequate response of the

Church of England to the sufferings of the underprivileged and the dispossessed.

Unsure of what to do next, he enlisted in October 1915, almost a year after the United Kingdom and Germany had gone to war. In 1916 he left for France with the Lancashire Fusiliers. In the winter of 1917, he found himself in the region of Amiens, where he marched on roads in an awful state, his men carrying enormous weights that were way too much for them. They waded through miles of trenches in two feet of water. They were housed in a hut where only 70 yards away a howitzer fired every minute day and night. They sustained a poison gas attack. They had marched for miles over shelled roads and flooded trenches, where those who got stuck in the heavy mud had to leave their waders, as well as some clothing and equipment, and move ahead on bleeding and freezing feet. They were under machine-gun fire, shelled by heavy explosives throughout the cold march, and were almost unconscious from fatigue when the poison-gas attack occurred.

Once that winter, for several days and nights, Owen and his men found themselves in open fields in the snow, with no support forces arriving to relieve them and with no chance to change wet, frozen clothes or to sleep. He wrote: "I kept alive on brandy, the fear of death, and the glorious prospect of the cathedral town just below us, glittering with the morning."

In April 1917, one rainy night, he was blown into the air while he slept. For the next several days he hid in a hole too small for his body, with the body of a friend, now dead, huddled in a similar hole opposite him, and less than six feet away.

Having endured such experiences, Owen was sent to a series of hospitals because of severe headaches eventually diagnosed as symptoms of shell shock. After a lengthy recovery, and despite his strong desire to remain in England to protest the continuation of the war, he felt the need to return to his comrades in the trenches. He said: "I shall be better able to cry my outcry, playing my part."

Owen used to say that his poetry expressed what he called "the pity of War," rather than the "glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power," which war had acquired in the popular mind. Owen's message for his generation, he said, must be one of warning rather than of consolation.

Still, when he returned to the battlefields of France in September 1918, Owen fought most valiantly and was nominated for the Military Cross. His company successfully attacked what was considered a "second Hindenburg Line". Losses were so heavy that among the commissioned officers only two survived. Owen took command and led the men to a place where he held the line for several hours from a captured German pill box. Owen was admirable in leading

his men, in the middle of the night, back to safety. They followed him with the utmost confidence. Owen was again moving among his men and offering encouragement when he was killed the next month.

Two weeks before his death he wrote "I cannot say I suffered anything, having let my brain grow dull. ... I shall feel anger again as soon as I dare, but now I must not."

Despite Wilfred Owen's extraordinary writing, only five poems were ever published in his lifetime – probably because he was strongly against the war, which was not in line with British policy at the time, particularly in their attempt to gather more and more people to sign up for the war.

But the poem 'Futility' was one of those published in his lifetime. It was written in May 1918, and it is about a dead soldier lying in the trenches. Here it is. Futility.

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.

If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Let us pray.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we remember all those who gave their lives
so we might live in freedom.
Let us not forget your many children
who still live in terror and peril today.
Inspire us to dedicate our lives in the service of others,
not just for the sake of remembrance,
but as a commitment to do all that we can
to bring about your peace, in our families,
in our friendships, in our communities,
in our nation and in our world.
Lord, bless all the peacekeepers
and bless your children
who warn the world
against the futility of war.
In the name of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer,
Amen.