

## Royal British Legion Sermon, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2024

We discovered the grave in the extension of the communal cemetery in Albert, a small town in the Somme department of northern France. My husband and I were on a pilgrimage to find and pay respects to my Great Uncle, Lieutenant Maurice Christie-Murray MC of 112 Brigade. Royal Field Artillery, who died in Albert, in the battle of the Somme on 9 September 1916, from wounds received on the 7th. He was 22. His brother, my grandfather, also died as a result of wounds and TB, but it was eight years later, in South Africa and we do not know where he is buried.

Why did we go? It was the only way to tell him, across time, that we loved, valued and honoured him – this young uncle whom I had never met, who had no direct family of his own to mourn him. We bought a tiny white rose tree from a sympathetic florist and, probably quite illegally, planted it at the foot of his stone. We wished it could have been a Peace Rose, also white, but that would have been too large.

“We will remember them.”

Our journey to Albert was an attempt to help my uncle’s memory “live on,” to say, this person existed and he was, as every human being is, important. Some would say it was a fruitless, futile gesture. But I think the great gift of re-remembering – putting together again – the stories, revisiting the histories, is that it helps us to grieve, to own the sadness we feel, not just for ourselves but for the whole world, so often caught up, as now, in war.

Both my grandfather and my great uncle joined up by choice in 1914, at the start of the Great War, as did many other young men. The writer, Rachel Mann describes the First World War as “a people’s war, a civilian’s war, a local war. Whole streets and communities joined en masse, moved by the call of their neighbour, of Country and King...

In our Gospel today, we heard of the calling of the first disciples, Simon/Peter and Andrew, James and John, who left their nets, and with enthusiasm and radical obedience, followed Jesus, not unlike my grandfather and great uncle and all the other young men who volunteered out of enthusiasm and obedience in 1914. But at the beginning of the gospel, we hear that Jesus’ cousin, John had been arrested. There is a sense of foreboding, the shadow of the cross is already present. It was also present in 1914. Over the next few

years, there was so much death that postmen and post-boys gave up their jobs because they couldn't bear to be the bearers of bad news to families."

One of the families to hear bad news was that of Wilfred Owen, the poet, whose parents got the news of this death as the bells rang out to celebrate the Armistice. Owen cared passionately for the men he led and likened their suffering to Jesus being prepared for crucifixion.

He wrote, 'For 14 hours yesterday I was at work – teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirsts until after the last halt; I attended his Supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet to see that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands to attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha.'

For Owen Christ was vividly alive and just as vividly dying every day in the soldiers he led through the hell on earth that was the first world war. God was not outside looking down on the suffering. God in Christ was right there in the mud and mucus.

Owen was not alive to hear the moment the guns fell silent on the 11<sup>th</sup> of the 11<sup>th</sup> of 1918, the day the first world war ended. But you can hear it. (play tape)

That tape comes from the archives of the Imperial War Museum. We hear a barrage of continuing heavy gunfire until 10:58. By one minute past the hour there was silence. The gunfire had stopped. And into that great silence you hear the sound of birdsong, the first remarkable sounds of peace.

What was it like to be there and hear that sudden silence. One person recounted, "Well do you know, strangely enough, we wept, because the silence was so awful. You see we'd been used to the noise of guns, all day long, all day long, all day long...it was so strange, to have silence."

The incomprehensible loss of life silenced communities back home, too, as they began to deal with the silence of the *Lost Generation*, who would never return home to talk and joke, and live and breath.

Wilfred Owen expressed the raw emotion of someone who lived with the horrors of war and wrestled to seek and know Christ within it. As one writer put it, Owen dug "deep into the mud of his awful experiences, to meet the one

who gave his life, once and for all, to save the world, from sin and from the horrors of war.”

On this day, we are encouraged to wrestle and dig deep too, over Gaza and Lebanon, over Ukraine, over the Sudan, to meet Christ who is suffering there. We are invited to remember those of our forces who continue to suffer though they have left active service. We are asked to think of families where loved ones have gone to war and never returned.

As we stand with others individually in their grief, as we stay with them and with the silence because no words are good enough, we make Christ known. Christ, who, apart from seven words, hung on his cross in silence holding the sin and pain and grief of the world in his mind and body so that we might know healing and forgiveness, and have the knowledge that in Christ death is not the end, and love, not violence is the final word.

In the face of everything that this service seeks to stand for we are silent and are embraced by the deep silence and stillness of God.