

## Remembrance Sunday 2017: Sermon preached in Kingsbury Parish Church

At 11am on the 11th November 1918, a piece of paper was signed sealing the Armistice, and marking the end of four years of war, such as the world had never known. An hour later, at 12 noon that same day, as church bells were still ringing in celebration of the good news, Mrs Harriet Owen in Shrewsbury was handed her own piece of paper. It was a telegram, informing her of the death in action of her eldest son, Wilfred, killed during the crossing of the Sambre-Oise Canal on November 4th 1918, aged 25.

And if, out of the many, many casualties of war, I choose to focus this morning on this one, Wilfred Henry Salter Owen, I do so not because of the cruel irony of the timing of the arrival of the news of his death, but because this man, Wilfred Owen, was both a remarkable individual, but also in a profound way representative of an entire generation.

Remarkable and representative - in part for his heroism. Wilfred Owen was a hero. After receiving treatment at Craiglockhart Military Hospital in Edinburgh for neurasthenia, then commonly known as shell shock and now more frequently described as post traumatic stress, Owen freely chose to return to the front line in France, which he did in August 1918. In October of that year, Owen led soldiers of his battalion in an attack on enemy strongholds near the village of Joncourt. For the exceptional courage and leadership he displayed in that action, he was awarded one of the country's highest honours, the Military Cross. The citation, which was finally issued on 30th July 1919, read as follows:

"For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in the attack on the Fonsomme Line on October 1st/2nd 1918. On the company commander becoming a casualty, he assumed command and showed fine leadership and resisted a heavy counter-attack. He personally manipulated a captured enemy machine gun from an isolated position and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Throughout he behaved most gallantly."

Remarkable heroism - but by no means unique. That's why I say Wilfred Owen stands as a representative of the courage that he shared with so many others. It is a courage that we rightly recognise, remember and honour today. Wilfred Owen was a hero, one among many.

But if the name of Wilfred Owen is remembered more widely and more vividly than that of the other names read out here and across our land today, it is not primarily on account of his Military Cross and courage in action.

Owen was a soldier and a poet. He stands out as remarkable (but also representative) as an example of those in the Great War who used their gifts with words to bear witness to the horror of war; the horror of war in general but more especially the particular horror of the trench warfare of 1914 to 1918. Any anthology of the poetry of the First World War (and there are many) will contain its fair share of verses written by Wilfred Owen. They are poems that still hold the power to shock, as Owen gives voice to experiences shared by many, yet which for most lay quite literally beyond words. Many of those who returned to their homes from the scene of battle found it impossible to speak of the horror they had been through, to those who could have no conception of what that war was like. Wilfred Owen and other war poets served as witnesses to that seemingly unspeakable horror. We will now hear one of the best known, but also most cutting and savage of those poems, entitled 'Dulce et decorum est', from the Latin motto, that can be translated, "How sweet and fitting it is, to die for one's country".

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clunky helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues -  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori

As a soldier, a hero; as a poet, a witness to the otherwise unspeakable horror he has experienced. What is perhaps most remarkable about Wilfred Owen is that these two aspects of war, the heroism and the horror, come together and are embodied in the one man. These things are not opposites. Too often we can be made to feel as if we have to choose between apparently contradictory positions, of on the one hand an unquestioning patriotism, that supports our country right or wrong and rejects any criticism or negative comment as betrayal, and on the other hand an equally unthinking pacifism, that refuses to concede that some things are worth fighting for. The example of Wilfred Owen teaches us that if we are to be true to Remembrance Sunday, and to the memory of those who have fallen, we need to acknowledge both truths - the heroism and the horror. The one does not diminish the other.

But to heroism and horror I must add a third, and one ultimately more important than either of the preceding two - and that third is humanity.

When Harriet Owen's celebrations of the signing of the Armistice were cut short on the 11th November 99 years ago by that devastating telegram, what mattered most was not that the country had lost a fine soldier or a great poet but that she had lost a dear son. Her grief, her tears, were neither more nor less than that of any other mother, father, sister, brother, lover, child, in this country or elsewhere who received a similar message of the death of one they loved. Whatever their rank, whatever their status, the names inscribed on war memorials here and throughout the world are the names first and foremost of human beings, infinitely loved, infinitely precious. By the war memorial here in the parish church is a book, prepared by Kingsbury History Society, that tells something of the story of each of those whose names we heard read out today. Take an opportunity to read it, and remember. The fallen, of whatever nation, were men and women like us, made by God, known by God, loved by God and held by God forever in his care. Each one was remarkable for their own gifts, their own personalities, their own stories. They are to be remembered, not primarily for the heroism they showed nor the horrors that they suffered, but for the humanity that they shared with their comrades and with their foes, with each other and with us; and so we will remember them.

John White  
12 November 2017