

Woodbine Willie

This sermon tells the story of a once-celebrated parson who in 1914 was catapulted from the obscurity of his suburban parish in Worcester to the front line, to take his place as a chaplain alongside the soldiers in the trenches in the conflict of the First World War. That man was Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, who is commemorated in the Church of England's calendar on 8 March, on the anniversary of his death in 1929: a man who wrestled with the sense of personal and national destiny in the light of the cross of Christ.

Studdert Kennedy: 'Woodbine Willie', the soldiers called him, because he was one of them. They loved him, and as he talked and prayed with the wounded and dying he would light a cigarette for them and put it into their mouths. After the war other clergy thought this a disreputable and disrespectful name, but he wore it, as he wore his military medals, with pride - though he also saw it as a kind of reproach. His *Rough Rhymes of a Padre*, a best-seller in its day, begins with a verse about this nickname:

*They gave me this name like their nature, compacted of laughter and tears,
a sweet that was born of the bitter, a joke that was torn from the years.
Their name! Let me hear it - the symbol of unpaid - unpayable - debt.
For the men to whom I owed God's Peace I put off with a cigarette.*

Like other chaplains torn from the familiar world of their parishes, he was utterly unprepared for the experience of the trenches: the mud and the mayhem, the suffering and the slaughter. Like Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem, the city that turned its back on the things that make for peace, his heart was broken by the folly and the pity of it all:

*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!*

But Studdert Kennedy was no pacifist; he believed that the cause was right, and the conflict had to be faced. Only through suffering could justice come. And although the men knew little of God, he was humbled by the rough and ready way they accepted their fate, by their comradeship in adversity, by their care of each other, and their many instinctive acts of kindness. He was happy to share in their lot, and to use their language - the slang and the curses which seem mild today, but which shocked other middle-class clergymen at the time. He used it in his dialect poems, including one about stretcher-bearers bringing a casualty back across the wire. It ends with Christ's own words, *Inasmuch as ye have done it ye have done it unto me*.

In other words, he made the link between his traditional sacramental faith - with a strong emphasis on Christ's suffering on the cross, and his self-offering in the bread and wine of the eucharist - and the self-giving of the soldiers. He would not have used the phrase 'lesser Calvaries' (as one of the Remembrancetide hymns does) - he knew that Christ's suffering and death was uniquely redemptive, and had a divine purpose way beyond the death of any soldier. But he saw vividly how Christ was with them in their suffering; how the bombs and the bullets were prefigured by his cross. It was this that he tried to show them in his dialect poems, in the emotional, often sentimental language they could understand: that Jesus was with them, and they were walking the way of the cross; that the suffering God was identified with them, and that the crucified one was offering them the power of his love, the power to *transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory* (Phil 3.21).

He taught the power of prayer to soldiers who were fatalists - who believed that bullets and shells had their name written on them and there was nothing they could do about it. That, he said, is a brave way, but it's not the Christian way, it's not the true meaning of 'thy will be done.'

Studdert Kennedy rejected the triumphalist God peddled by the English bishops at the time, whose views he parodied as

*Praise to God in heaven's highest and in all the depths be praise,
who in all his works is brutal, like a beast in all his ways.*

That was not his God:

*God, the God I love and worship, reigns in sorrow on the tree,
broken, bleeding, but unconquered, very God of God to me.*

He felt keenly the pain of the mothers back home learning of the deaths of their young sons:

*Just a little scrap of paper in a yellow envelope
And the whole world is a ruin, even hope.*

He compared them with Mary, weeping at the cross; and in another poem he imagines a bereaved mother at the altar, who says:

*Dear Lord, I hold my hands to take thy body, broken here for me.
Accept the sacrifice I make - my body, broken there, for thee.
His was my body, born of me, born of my bitter travail pain,
and it lies broken on the field, swept by the wind and the rain.*

And he comments:

*Surely a mother understands thy thorn-crowned head,
the mystery of thy pierced hands - the broken bread.*

After the war, Studdert Kennedy found it hard to settle back into conventional, civilian life. The only conventional thing about him was his clerical dress: he always wore one of those deep starched collars of yesteryear. He looked around for new work - going back to a parish was out of the question. He devoted himself to the cause of peace and reconciliation - building a world fit for the heroes whose lives he had felt privileged to share. For, as he had written years before,

*Peace does not mean the end of all our striving;
joy does not mean the drying of our tears;
peace is the power that comes to souls striving
up to the light where God himself appears.*

Or, in the more graphic words of one of his dialect poems, commenting on the churches' post-war initiative,

*That's what I reckon these parsons mean
with their Mission of 'Pentance and 'Ope,
They want us to wash old England's face clean,
wi' the grace of Gawd for soap.*

(The Mission of Repentance and Hope was a national initiative, launched in 1916: it had little impact.)

So for the last 10 years of his life he toured the country tirelessly for the Industrial Christian Fellowship, despite chronic asthma; he worked himself into the grave at the age of 45, and died on 8 March 1929.

Studdert Kennedy's vivid language offended some church people. Archbishop William Temple wrote that, until he met him, he had been

as much repelled as attracted by his books and speeches...he appeared to rejoice in administering shocks to respectability for the mere fun of it. In other words, I thought of him as a conscious poser.

But once they met, Temple was captivated, and concluded

If to be a priest is to carry others on the heart and offer them with self in the sacrifice of human nature to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy was the finest priest that I have known.

His grasp of God's love was red-blooded and passionate. In the trenches he came to understand that God in Christ suffers with his people, and that his sufferings are not yet complete. This was a suspect way of thinking in the 1920s, but is a commonplace now among theologians. A final poem, called 'Indifference', expresses this view, and protests against the neglect of the things of God that is so much a feature of our own times:

*When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged him on a tree,
they drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
they crowned him with a crown of thorns, red were his wounds and deep,
for those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.*

When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed him by;
they never hurt a hair of him, they only let him die;
for men had grown more tender, and they would not give him pain,
they only just passed down the street, and left him in the rain.*

*Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do,"
and still it rained the wintry rain that drenched him through and through.
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
and Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.*

* he wrote, but we could substitute the name of any contemporary city

[There's a bit more about him on our parish website at <http://www.stgite.org.uk/media/stpauldockstreetcurates.html> and lots more about him elsewhere]