

Today we remember the Armistice that was signed on 11th November 1918 – at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month and the guns of the First world war fell silent. Many people wear poppies as a symbol of Remembrance. Shortly after losing a friend in Ypres in 1915, a Canadian doctor, Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae was inspired by the sight of poppies growing in battle-scarred fields to write his now famous poem 'In Flanders Fields'.

In Flanders Fields

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.*

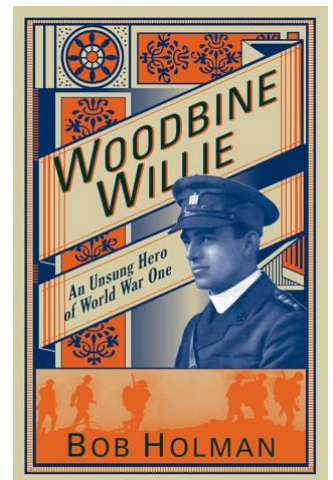
*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

Since the end of WW1 the day is used to remember those who have perished in all wars. The word re-member invites us to look again at the 'members' of war – soldiers, sailors, airmen as well as all civilians – and all the causes and the horrors of war. To re-member – to put the pieces back together again and reflect, and in particular, to remember the sacrifice of those who have given their lives for the cause of freedom. It is no easy task. As I have personally reflected on this, I find myself in a dark place and struggling to find hope. The horrible war between Russia and Ukraine which began on 24th February last year shows no sign of ending. The US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, estimates that there are about 100,000 military casualties on each side in the conflict; and as many as 40,000 Ukrainian civilian casualties. We had almost got used to that war, when Hamas began firing missiles and bombs into Israel and another bloody war began. So far, the latest violence has caused more than 1,400 deaths in Israel and at least 10,000 in Gaza as of Nov. 7, according to authorities on both sides. This war is having a direct effect in this country, with antisemitic attacks skyrocketing.

And these are not the only wars going on. There are currently 32 countries in the world where armed conflict is taking place. Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Libya, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo...the list goes on. These conflicts don't only cause death and suffering. They also devastate the environment. Faced with the prospect of destruction, people leave their own countries and seek refuge in places that are peaceful so they can rebuild their lives. War is a major cause of migration – the small boats, people fleeing conflict zones – that is so much in the news today. Yet many of these people face a double jeopardy: not only the threat of violence or economic ruin in their own country, but rejection or imprisonment on floating barges in so-called civilized countries. Like this one. The Illegal Migration Bill became law on 20 July 2023. The stated aim of the Act is to prevent and deter 'unlawful' migration by those using unsafe routes. Anyone deemed to have entered the UK illegally – that means the small boats – will have their asylum claims automatically declared "inadmissible", meaning they will not be considered under the UK's asylum system and the Home Office will not process their claims. The Government then intends to "detain and swiftly remove" these people. To Rwanda. I see that other countries are getting the idea now. Italy is planning to ship migrants off to Albania.

Enough of this. Let's try and find some light in the darkness. I'm finding some light by thinking of Woodbine Willie. Woodbine Willie, or the Revd. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, was an Anglican priest who volunteered as a chaplain during World War One, a man whose support for ordinary soldiers was unique. He was known for handing out cigarettes, Woodbines, alongside New Testaments to soldiers and his willingness to be alongside the troops on the front line and over the top, caused him to quickly rise in popularity. Father Geoffrey's actions on the evening of June 15, 1917 would later see him awarded the military cross. His own written account is as follows:

'It was a common enough scene in those days, an advanced collecting post for wounded in the Ypres salient, on the evening of June 15, 1917. Twenty men all smashed up and crammed together in a little concrete shelter, which would have been full with ten in it. Outside the barrage banging down all around us ... A boy with a badly shattered thigh in the corner moaning and yelling by turns for "somefing to stop the pain". So it had been for an hour or more. Between this Black Hole of Calcutta and Battalion H.Q. Death and Hell to go through. Hell inside and hell out, and the moaning of the boy in the corner like the moaning of a damned soul. There was no morphine. That was the horror. Someone must go for it. I went. I went because the hell outside was less awful than the hell in. I didn't go to do a heroic deed or perform a Christian service; I went because I couldn't bear the moaning any longer. I ran, and as I ran, and cowered down in shell-holes waiting for a chance to run again, I thought – thought like lightning – whole trains of thought came tearing through my mind like non-



stop expresses to God knows where. I thought: poor devil, I couldn't have stood that a minute longer. I wasn't doing any good either. If I get through and bring the morphia back, it will be like bringing heaven to him. That is the only heaven he wants just now, dead-drunk sleep. If I bring it back I will be to him a saviour from hell. I'd like that. I'm glad I thought of that. I can't pretend that it was that I came for. It wasn't. Still I'm glad. He wants to forget, to forget and sleep. Poor old chap. Heaven is a morphia pill.'¹

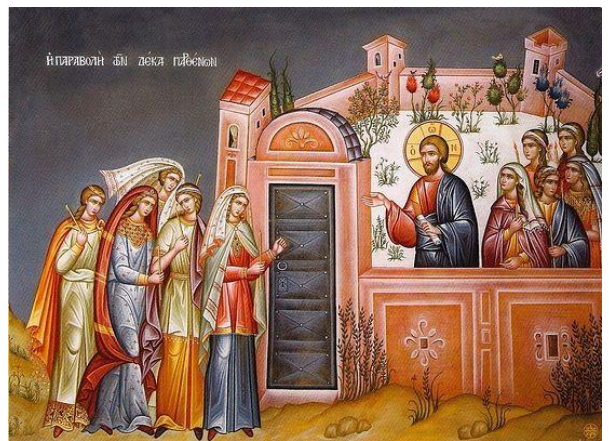
The official notice of his award was published in the London Gazette on the 16th of August 1917. It stated: 'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He showed the greatest courage and disregard for his own safety in attending the wounded under heavy fire. He searched shell-holes for our own, and enemy wounded, assisting them to the Dressing Station, and his cheerfulness and endurance had a splendid effect upon all ranks in the front line trenches, which he constantly visited.' Father Geoffrey was an initial supporter of Britain's participation in the war. However, throughout the war his views began to change, and he started to despise its destruction of God's creation. He expressed his change of view in his poem called "Waste":

Waste
*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!*

I love his description of his motivation to go over the top and find some morphine for the wounded soldier he was crammed into a room with. He wrote that it was because he couldn't stand listening to the boy crying. And yet there must have been something deeper in him – vocation, sense of duty, the Spirit of God – which drove him to do the extraordinary, to face the possibility of his own death as he went to find a bottle of morphine. And this gives us hope. I also love the way he found something very dear to the hearts of the soldiers he ministered to: cigarettes. That might not be PC nowadays,

but back then, almost all the soldiers smoked and a Woodbine – well, that was gold. In my careful reading of the Daily Mail, I came across this piece about Woodbine Willie: 'Biographer Dr Linda Parker spent five years researching Studdert Kennedy's life and estimates he gave away a staggering 865,000 cigarettes at his own expense. Over the course of nearly three years, between December 1915 and September 1918, Studdert Kennedy spent (the equivalent of) £43,249 - every spare penny of his Ministry of Defence salary, she believes'.²

We have two interesting, and relevant, readings set for today by the lectionary. In the first, in Paul's first letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul writes of the future coming of Christ, and of the resurrection: 'For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.' (1 Thess 4:16). He goes on to say, 'Therefore encourage one another with these words' (v.18). That theme of *Christ coming* is paralleled in our gospel reading with the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. The five foolish bridesmaids didn't have enough oil to keep their lamps alight to greet the bridegroom when he showed up late at midnight. But the five slightly smug wise bridesmaids did, and they were the ones who got admitted to the wedding banquet. The point? *Be ready. 'Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour'* (Matthew 25:13). In this country, in which we are lucky enough to live pretty securely and we don't worry too much about what tomorrow might bring. Like most people in Ukraine, probably, before President Putin started sending tanks over the border. Or like people in southern Israel before Hamas rained down rockets on them. Or like ordinary people in Gaza, who weren't Hamas, and who also had no idea what was coming. They do now. 'Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour'. This is a signal to us in our (relative) safety and security. We don't know what the future holds. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy didn't know what the future held, what he would encounter or be called to do but he was *ready*. He had welcomed Christ into his heart and responded to His call on his life. He was *awake*. Are we?



Richard Croft

¹ <https://cvm.org.uk/downloads/greaterlove-woodbine-willie.pdf>

² <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5865655/WWI-chaplain-Woodbine-Willie-spent-entire-salary-865-000-cigarettes-sick-troops.html>