

COMMEMORATION OF CENTENARY OF WORLD WAR 1: Sermon 03 August 2014

Anne Michaels is a poet and author. Her novel 'Fugitive Pieces' is based on the imperative that we must do all we can to tell the stories of those who cannot tell their own story. It's a novel in which those affected by World War 2, especially by the holocaust, do all they can to tell the stories of those who cannot tell their own story.

Anne Michaels writes in one of her poems:

The dead read backwards
As in a mirror. They gather
In the white field and look up,
Waiting for someone
To write their names.

Today we are focusing on the centenary of World War 1. It is an opportunity to tell the stories of those who cannot tell their own story and to see how that story affects our own story.

So this morning we will think about the stories of the peoples whose names written on the WW1 Roll of Honour, here at St John's. I'm no historian but it seems to me that what we can glean from our Roll of Honour gives us a view in 'microcosm' of World War 1.

We don't have much information about many on that Roll - some we have no more information than their name.

William Hill - we only have his name, it's the last on the Roll - all the rest are in alphabetical order. We don't know his story and if you search for William Hill on the Commonwealth War Graves site you will find 16 pages of 'William Hill's who died in the first World War- that surely tells its own story.

For others we know their regiment, the date on which they died, where they are buried. - or where their name is inscribed because their body was never found or identified.

For some we know their age when they were killed. For some we know their address in the parish, the names of their wives and children or their parents. For some we know the work that they did before they were called up or volunteered. For some we know the work of their parents.

Many of the men were from what we might term ordinary working families - their fathers' jobs are listed as draper, grocer's assistant, brewer and publican, bricklayer, railway clerk and printer compositor. Alfred Offley has more of a military background - the son of an infantry sergeant. The work of the men themselves included that of being an errand boy, a painter and decorator's apprentice, a coal labourer, a plumber's apprentice, a schoolteacher.

The war begins on 4th August - by the 26th August Alfred Offley, aged 26, a drummer in the Suffolk Regiment, is dead*. By 22nd September Charles Hancock, aged 40, a private in the Royal Marines, is dead - his mother was living at 15 Marshall Road. The cost of the war was felt early in the parish.

Of the dates of death known only one is recorded in 1915. Denis Digges La Touche, aged 20 a captain in the Welsh Regiment is killed on the 8th August in Turkey, in the Dardenelles. His parents lived at 230 Hills Road - he doesn't come from what we may term an 'ordinary working class family' - he has been educated at Shrewsbury School - he was awarded a senior scholarship at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge in 1913; a scholarship never to be taken up. Instead his name is inscribed on a war memorial in Turkey. He reminds us that the men - the young men - of this parish served in many places across the world.

But then we reach 1916. Most of the known dates of death for those on the Roll of Honour are in 1916 and 1917. July 1916 claims the lives of at least 6 men of, or connected with, this parish - their names are now carved on the Memorial at Thiepval or they are buried in cemeteries in the area of the Somme.

Kate Huckle of 74 Blinco Grove received news of the death of her husband Harry that month.

Walter Golding and his wife, at 109 Blinco Grove, heard of the death of their son, also named Walter, aged 22.

Charles Bowyer and his wife of 65 Blinco Grove heard that on 20th July 2016 their 19 year old son Charles had died.

Herbert and Louisa Howell of 42 Hartington Grove, learnt that their 19 year old son, also Herbert, had died that same day.

We can perhaps imagine the impact on the people living in these Roads, so close to where we sit now, as this news came through - personal tragedies, felt by the whole community.

How many breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn't news of their son or husband or brother?

The news of deaths continues through 1916 and 1917 - more names now recorded on memorials in France and Belgium, which include those at Thiepval, Tyne Cot, and on the Menin Gate; on naval memorials in Chatham and Portsmouth; those who were identified and given final resting places in the many cemeteries of northern France and Belgium.

As the war drew to a close there must have been the hope for all that their loved ones would return. This wasn't the case for Mrs Marshall of Hills Avenue, whose son Thomas, died on the 23rd August 1918, or the family of Gerald Smyth who died in September 1918 - and who is buried in Trumpington Cemetery. Some died after the war - presumably of wounds - John Nightingale who died on the 12th November 1918 - hear that date again - the 12th November 1918 . He is buried at St Andrew's, Cherry Hinton.

We know very little of the individual stories of the men. Two received awards for bravery. Bert Lack was posthumously awarded the Military Medal for bravery - he gave his life, holding his post, allowing his comrades to escape. Walter Golding was awarded the DCM - Distinguished Conduct Medal - the citation reads: 11th March 1916. for conspicuous gallantry when he kept up communication and patrolled the telephone line between the battery and observing station all day under a very heavy shell fire.

I am sure there will have been many unrecorded acts of courage by the men on the St John's Roll of Honour. Of course there is also no record of those who survived and returned but who were permanently scarred, physically, mentally or emotionally, by their experience of war.

This is some of the story of the people named on St John's Roll of Honour and of course a similar story is told by every Roll of Honour. The details will be different but the overall picture is the same – across Europe and beyond.

The story of the St John's Roll of Honour is also our story as a church. The church itself was only 20 years old in 1916. Many of these men will have grown up watching the building of this church. How many of them came into the church before they left to go to war?

This week I have found myself thinking of my predecessors – the Rev'd Love – who was here until 1914 and the Rev'd Jackson who was vicar here 1914-27. Did the Rev'd Jackson visit each of the homes when news came to him of a loss of life? How did the people of the church support the bereaved? How did the community here support one another as so many lived with the anxiety of waiting for news of a loved one? How did the clergy and congregation alike maintain hope and live out their faith in those years?

We know that many soldiers were given a pocket New Testament or Bible with a card of commitment – and many signed that card of commitment to Christ before they left. We know that some were literally saved by the pocket New Testament when bullets hit their breast pocket in which the New Testament had been placed – one report states that the bullet went 'as far as Acts'. But of course most soldier's lives weren't saved by their New Testament.

There is surely a poignancy that what they were carrying was the story of the suffering of a beloved Son, the death of a comparatively young man and the pain of suffering. Yet also at the centre of the Christian faith is the resurrection – the ultimate defeat of all that works against the establishment and growth of the kingdom of God, the defeat of death itself. At the heart of our faith is the telling and re-telling of the story of Christ, the story of God's great love for the world.

So how do we approach this centenary in the light of these stories? We do so with a huge sense of sadness and loss for the lives that were taken; we do so aware of the loss that was felt by each of the families – each individual loss no less poignant because we talk of such large numbers of deaths. We do so aware of acts of bravery and heroism to be found on all sides.

We approach this centenary profoundly aware of those who even today are having their lives devastated by the impact of war – in Gaza, in Israel, in Libya, in Syria, in the Central African Republic, in the Ukraine and in places that never reach our news headlines. We approach this centenary asking what have we learnt in the intervening 100 years – there is little point in telling the story unless we want to learn from it. We approach this centenary in the context of worship, holding before God our concern for

those whose lives are being devastated by war, holding before God both our desire for peace and a willingness to admit the complexities of relationships between nations - but wondering why in our day so many civilians, so many children, are paying the price for those complexities. So we pray for the leaders of the nations and their advisers. We approach this centenary with humility, with frustration, with a desire for peace, for reconciliation and for justice which we believe accords with God's desire for peace, reconciliation and justice . And we pray also for ourselves -for a willingness to learn, to pray and to live in ways that promote peace, justice and reconciliation.

(* A different source, discovered after the writing of the sermon has Alfred Offley killed in action on 9th April 1915)