



*Photo by fdecomite*

In the last set of reflections we look at the spiritual issues involved in human relationships and at bonds of love and friendship and at loss.

There are four reflections on *Cigarettes, Sons, Daughters* and *Ghosts*.

## Cigarettes

'When there ain't no gal to kiss you,  
And the postman seems to miss you,  
And the fags have skipped an issue,  
Carry on.'

Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy ('Woodbine Willie') *The Spirit*



In a society which now well understands the dangers of smoking, it is easy to overlook the importance of cigarettes to the soldiers fighting in the First World War. Cigarettes brought calm to agitated men, stuck waiting around; they gave soldiers something to do and something to share. Cigarettes were currency but also easy and important gifts.

This was well understood by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy (“Woodbine Willie”), a forces chaplain, who combined giving Woodbine cigarettes along with Bibles to soldiers leaving for the front. He said that his ministry was based on ‘a box of fags in your haversack, and a great deal of love in your heart’. <sup>1</sup>

This tells us something important about the spirituality of the First World War. In a situation where the impact on the body was so extreme, afflicting people with cold, wet, noise, and stress, things which gave bodily comfort became sources of powerful restoration and hope. Similarly, smoking also helped soldiers deal with the boredom while they were waiting for orders. Lack of a ‘fag issue’ could sap the spirit and leave the men feeling bereft and irritable. So a cup of tea or a cigarette as acts of simple human kindness could help people cope and form important bonds of friendship and sharing. Cigarettes were commonly shared between several individuals, cupping it in their hands so that the burning tobacco would not show and give their position away. Soldiers also smoked pipes which concealed the tobacco and many other soldiers rolled their own from tobacco wrapped in thin cigarette papers. The tobacco was typically kept in tins to keep it dry. Soldiers who did not smoke before the war quickly took up smoking when deployed, so that it became an important act of solidarity and friendship.

As a Christian chaplain, Woodbine Willie understood that there was no pastoral care without recognising the spiritual needs of the body too. Woodbine Willie didn’t just give out cigarettes however. He was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery, searching for the wounded while under fire and helping and encouraging them back to the dressing stations. His way of witnessing to Christ was on one hand giving practical gifts, sharing his friendship, and on the other, sparing no thought for himself in helping those in need. After the war, on the basis of his experiences, he became a strong proponent of pacifism.

You can find out more about Woodbine Willie at

<https://www.churchofengland.org/ww1/history/woodbine-willie-in-world-war-one.aspx>

## Prayer

*Loving God,*

*We remember with thanks the service of Woodbine Willie.*

*We thank you for the comfort the soldiers found  
in tea and cigarettes, new rations, friendships.*

*We pray today for all our forces’ chaplains.*

*We thank you for their care and Christian witness,  
their selfless love and dedicated service.*

*Amen*

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<sup>1</sup> J. K. Mozley, ed., *G. A. Studdert Kennedy by his friends* (1929). P 141.

## Sons

'..the swift iron burning bee

Drained the wild honey of their youth'

Isaac Rosenberg, *Dead Man's Dump*



*'Reg' Photo uploaded to Flickr by Tim Green; edited ARR.*

Blaise Cendrars wrote that the 'most frightful cry one can ever hear' was the sound which came from the battlefield at night of mortally injured soldiers calling for their mothers.<sup>2</sup> The sounds of those men calling for their mothers was so dreadful to the other soldiers that they would shoot at the sounds in the dark in the hope of silencing the suffering soldiers rather than have to go on listening to their pleas.

There is something in the cries of these wounded soldiers of the First World War about to die far from home, which plumbs the spiritual depths of a person's being. Cendrars notes that they are

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<sup>2</sup> Cendrars, B., (1946) *La Main Coupée*, (1973) English translation *Lice*, London, Peter Owen Ltd, pp. 186-188.

'infantile' voices; the wounded become children calling for the person who loves them, who will come to take care of them, heal them, wipe their tears. When all hope is gone and the dying person knows that they are alone and beyond help, then they strive to return to the place where they were last safe and in reach of comfort. That this would so unsettle the surviving soldiers is hardly surprising, stirring up a mixture of fear, loss, grief and compassion. How eerie and distressing those calls must have been and how terrible the suffering of those dying by inches in the dark.

This last appeal for help has been documented in other situations. Critically wounded soldiers call to their friends for immediate aid and to their mothers to bridge a deep spiritual void. What does this tell us? It tells us that in the desperation of war, when a person is dying, alone and lost, there is a deep need for return: return to one's place of origin, return to a time of safety. But such cries are not necessarily just of despair and regression but might also be a final declaration of connection and love. It is not surprising then, that Scripture talks of a homecoming to a tender God who wipes the tears from the eyes of those who have died (Revelation 21.4).

We are told that from the cross, in his dying moments, Jesus believed himself abandoned by God. So we might imagine that in those cries from the battlefield we also hear the voice of Christ. And what the Christian story reveals is that those cries are not unheard. When the horrors of human destruction are over, Jesus returns to his friends to show that this is not the end. He says to them: 'Peace be with you' (John 20.19).

## **Prayer**

*God of love,*

*We remember all those in the First World War who died far from family and friends.*

*We pray for all who cried out at their end*

*and for all who heard their cries.*

*Today we pray for all who are parted from their families;*

*all who feel abandoned and lost ;*

*and for all who are making their way back to you.*

*Amen*

## Daughters



*Photo: V H Hammer*

*'But, though kind Time may many joys renew,  
There is one greatest joy I shall not know  
Again, because my heart for loss of You  
Was broken, long ago.'*

Vera Brittain, *Perhaps (to R.A.L)*

*A story from Anne Richards, Mission Theology Adviser, Church of England.*

When I was a teenager, Auntie Jane was a well-known figure in the village where I lived. A pillar of the local Congregational church, she was often seen about on her bike or working on her allotment. She lived in a small, run-down cottage and lived frugally on her vegetables, ironing her skirts with an old flat iron warmed in front of the fire. I helped her knit endless squares for blankets for children in other countries while she sang warbly arias from *The Messiah* incessantly, and she once embarrassed me beyond measure when I went with her to a concert and she sang louder than the entire choir from her place in the audience (and horribly out of tune). Her contribution to ecumenism was to go to every other church's bazaar, fete or concert and her inevitable conclusion was always 'Very nice cup of tea. Not as good as ours, but very nice all the same'. Everyone thought she was an eccentric spinster, gone a bit daft from too much religion and living alone.

One day, she asked me to come by her cottage as she had something to give me. When I got there, amid much singing and talking to herself under her breath she reached under her simple little single bed and took out a worn suitcase. Inside the suitcase was a length of soft, shiny, faded and yellowed material, a bit frayed around the edges.

'What is it?' I asked.

'It's parachute silk' she said. 'I thought you might like it for your dress when you get married. I had hopes you know, so I kept it, but he didn't come back, so...so...I don't need it any more.'

I was at once touched by the offered gift and embarrassed by its obvious uselessness. The silk was so damaged it was coming apart in her fingers even as she held it out. Yet it was clear that for a person who owned almost nothing she was offering me the most precious thing in her possession. But it was in that moment, holding the faded, frayed silk, I saw past her dotty old lady exterior to the young woman she had been, holding in her hands the soft, bright and precious material, full of hope. There had been a boyfriend, who could have been a fiancé, with a promised wedding at the church, a life together, children, and hopes of growing old with a companion. I asked her to tell me about it. As a teenager herself, she had been put to sewing the parachutes for people manning observation balloons. Her boyfriend was not allowed a parachute in his plane however, because they were felt to be too bulky and too tempting to use if the plane were hit. So the parachute under her bed had another kind of terrible poignancy.

Her boyfriend lost his life, - and she lost hers even though she survived. She had a life, a good life, a life of dedication and service, which the church nurtured and nourished and also consumed, but the war took from her one of her cherished futures.

Vera Brittain, (mother of British politician Baroness Shirley Williams) made an important contribution to the cause of pacifism. Yet she also lost her fiancé, to whom her poem *Perhaps* is dedicated, and never got over the death of her brother in the war, requesting that her own ashes be scattered finally on his grave.

We give thanks for the sons, husbands and fathers, who were lost, but we should give thanks and pray for the mothers and daughters like Auntie Jane and Vera Brittain who made different lives and worked for a better, more peaceful world, when theirs was shattered. Their broken hearts, their memories of other, hoped-for lives, in faded photographs and keepsakes kept under beds, should also be remembered.

## **Prayer**

*God of the broken-hearted,  
you hold in your heart the tears of all who mourn.  
You know the evenings spent with photographs, with questions,  
the void of the missing and the dead.*

*We give thanks for those who go on living;  
their rebuilt lives, their acts of dedication.  
For those who nursed, dug, fed, and worked for peace,  
so that others should not suffer as they had done.*

*Help us to see beyond their smiling faces,  
and take from them the gifts entrusted to us.  
May we receive whatever is left unhealed  
until that final healing is found in you.*

## Ghosts

Whispers shall comfort us out of the dark--  
Hands--ah God!--that we knew!  
Visions and voices --look and hark!--  
Shall prove that the tale is true

Rudyard Kipling *En-Dor*



*Photo: Matt Wilson*

For many families, the household had said goodbye to fathers, brothers and sons and had maybe received a few communications through letters or postcards as the war progressed, then the letters stopped and nothing further was heard. Ever.

Many soldiers were not just killed but vaporised in an explosion or blown to so many bits that it was impossible to recover for sure anything that might have been an individual's body. Blaise Cendrars tells the story of a soldier who was blown up by a shell when he was getting in a horse-drawn cab. His friends gathered up whatever bits they could find and buried the mixture of horse and human together. Eventually however, they also found his moustache, blood sticking it to a shop sign. So they recovered the moustache and buried that; the only part of 'him' they could really lay to rest.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cendrars, p 20.



So many who fought and died simply became ghosts for their families who had no real way to achieve closure or say goodbye. They could be almost certain that their loved ones were dead, but how and where they could not know. People felt guilty for moving on with their lives, or for remarrying. Unanswered questions and terrible imaginings of their loved-ones ends accompanied them into their future.

It is perhaps unsurprising that spiritualism rose in popularity, as those left behind turned to psychics and mediums to hold séances and give readings in which the silent missing and the dead were given voices and passed on messages of love and comfort to those grieving. Sometimes, the 'spirit' was said to have materialised in the darkened room and went about touching and stroking the bereaved. This continued despite some obviously fraudulent people offering services, as satirised in Kipling's poem *En-Dor*. Grieving families seem to have gone to them even though they were *well aware* the people they were paying were frauds. They needed to have that sense of recovery and closure even if they actually knew it wasn't real. Sometimes what people wanted was permission to move on, to form new relationships and to have the chance, any chance, to say goodbye.

This tells us how important to spirituality a funeral can be. Without a body or a ritual that allows the living to say goodbye it can be difficult to accept that a person's life narrative is closed and so people will need to find ways to invent that closure. The ghosts of the First World War are not just 'spirits' or 'remnants' of those who have 'passed over' as the spiritualists might have it, but vessels of love and news and relationship that the living carried with them and had nowhere to put them down. And that asks us, as Christians, a question: what do we give people who have no sense of closure? Where do we offer people a place to lay down their precious vessels of love and longing?

## Prayer

*God of the grieving,  
we remember all those today who do not know  
what has happened to their loved ones  
who are certainly dead.*

*We give thanks that you know  
their unknown resting places, their unmarked graves.  
We pray for all those  
who struggle to accept their painful loss.*

*Help us to recognise what they carry:  
the final stories, news, the 'sorry' left unsaid;  
help us to find ways to love the grieving,  
relieve their burdens, set them free to live.*