

Faith and Love in the First World War

Introduction



Photo: Ian Britton

2014 is the centenary of the beginning of the First World War. No one who fought in that war remains alive today and so many people are looking at ways to commemorate the centenary and ask what that war means for people today.

Major events such as vigils, poppy planting schemes and other kinds of commemoration have been planned for the centenary. Churches are, of course, involved, and the Church of England has a website <https://www.churchofengland.org/ww1> with information, stories as well as liturgical resources to help Christians engage in the commemoration. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland also has a range of e-books and resources at <http://www.ctbi.org.uk/>

The resources contained here are rather different. In the reflections and prayers which follow, we will be looking at little things which affected the lives of all who were involved, friend and enemy alike; little things which nonetheless are spiritual matters, asking questions about God in the midst of warfare. What was it like to have lice in your clothes, or mud in your boots? What was it like to live in a smashed landscape full of barbed wire? What was it like to stay at home imagining what was happening and have to carry on living without perhaps ever knowing what happened to your loved ones?

In what follows we will not look at the big, overarching questions of warfare but at its underbelly, at the simple human concerns which were present then and present now in the conflicts which continue to break our hearts around the globe. Where is God in this? In our reflections we will reach down into those dark, little known places and try to find out.

One of the people whose recollections we have followed is perhaps not as well known in this country as our own war poets and chroniclers. Frederic-Louis Sauser, known as Blaise Cendrars, a writer of Swiss-Scottish parentage who lost his right arm in the First World War, wrote a book called *La Main Coupée*, published in English under the title *Lice*. In that memoir Cendrars remembers friends and comrades, but also openly wonders whether God could be found in those horrific circumstances. Recalling with pity and despair the death of a man who suffocated upside down in a latrine, Cendrars says bitterly, 'God is absent from the battlefields. He is keeping his nose clean. He is hiding. It is a disgrace.'¹

Yet the question of where God is matters. Cendrars documents the way spirituality springs up perpetually in the trenches: why it is necessary to go to great lengths to recover a friend's blown-off moustache and bury it; how ordinary objects become spiritualised; how letters from home become angelic messages. He himself spent thirty days in jail for taken forbidden photographs of the destruction of a roadside shrine. The final horrific memory, documented in *Lice*, is the incessant calling of dying young men for their mothers, to which Cendrars responds with 'Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? Why did the knees prevent me? Or why the breasts that I should suck?' (Job 3.11-12). Cendrars, along with all those who passed on their experiences, directs us to the effects of war on the spiritual being through the little things, and offers us insights for reflection.

In the first four reflections: Mud; Rats; Lice; and Poppies, we look at some aspects of the human body and the natural world and what these meant to the spiritual lives of the men of the First World War.

¹ Cendrars, B., (1946) *La Main Coupée*, (1973) English translation *Lice*, London, Peter Owen Ltd, p.149.

Mud



Photo: Janet Ramsden

'I contemplated this livid dawn, slowly disrobing in the mud. Nothing in this whole miserable, dripping, ravaged and tattered landscape was solid, and I myself stood there like a beggar at the threshold of the world, soaked to the skin, slimy, plastered with shit from head to toe...' ²

When we repeat the lines from Laurence Binyon's famous poem *For the Fallen*, 'at the going down of the sun and in the morning/we will remember them' we perhaps do not remember the conditions of the stand-to which Cendrars recalls so vividly. The First World War was the first to include extensive trench warfare. For the men going to the trenches, one of the biggest features of ordinary life was the presence of inescapable mud. If you cut deep twelve foot deep trenches in that earth, you hit water and mud was the inevitable result, added to by rainfall. Additionally, prolonged shelling churned the ground between the trenches into mud and reduced no-man's-land to a mass of ruined earth. Soldiers had to stand in the mud for hours on end, feeling it seep into their boots and clothes, until like Cendrars, they were soaked through and unable to get dry. This led to many soldiers suffering from 'trench foot', with gangrenous sores developing as a result of prolonged exposure to damp. The writer and artist David Jones talked vividly in his own war memoir about the way the 'fluid mud is icily discomforting that circles your thighs'. ³

So if we remember them, perhaps we should remember the pain, cold, wet and mud and what those conditions do to the human spirit. Mud forms part of the spiritual landscape of the First World War,

² Cendrars p. 47

³ Jones, D., (1937) *In Parenthesis*, London, Faber, p.45.

representing destruction, dirt, pain and soul-sapping work. When carefully tilled fields and entire landscapes turn to featureless mud it is like the undoing of creation and a foretelling of death.

It was possible to drown in the mud of no-man's land. If wounded soldier fell into the mud, they might well asphyxiate before they could be reached. Mud was therefore also the enemy, lying in wait to claim you. Yet mud was also what kept you safe in the trenches, the moving of tons and tons of damp soil to create a maze of earthworks that were your best protection against bombardment. Mud offered soldiers a different soundscape, as bullets, grenades and shells buzzed, plopped and burst into the sodden and churned ground and became memories that could not be explained adequately if they had not been shared.

So if we 'will remember them' we should remember what it is like to live on the edge of life and death in the mud, the soil of God's good creation, sheltering you, but also ready at a moment's notice to become your tomb, to turn you, wet and dirty, back into the mud itself.

Prayer

*God of the earth, God of dirt and mud,
at the going down of the sun and in the morning,
we will remember all those who endured
the cold, clinging wet and fluid soils.*

*We will remember the tilled fields once white for harvest,
the stands of trees, smashed to pieces,
the landscapes of human toil and habitation,
reduced to ruin, the spoil heaps of waste.*

*We will remember the mud-sounds of war,
the buzzing of bees that are bullets, zinging into soil,
the wet explosions, fountain splatters of earth,
the strange sucking and gurgle of submerged deaths.*

*God of the earth, God of the lost and buried,
help us to value your good soil, to tend it, plant it,
restore what is broken and ruined to its beauty,
and when we wash the dirt from our hands, remember them.*

Rats



Photo: Sonia Pauen

*'Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies'*

Isaac Rosenberg, *Break of Day in the Trenches*

'Cuinchy was one of the worst places for rats. They came up from the canal and fed on the many corpses and multiplied. When I was here with the Welsh a new officer came to the company, and, as a token of welcome, he was given a dug-out containing a spring-bed. When he turned in that night he heard a scuffling, shone his torch on the bed, and there were two rats on his blankets tussling for possession of a severed hand. This was thought a great joke.'⁴

Rats were ubiquitous in the trenches, attracted by scraps of food left in the litter of discarded food cans and by the presence of corpses. For some soldiers, the rats were a sign of life going on untroubled by human affairs. As Isaac Rosenberg noted, they could happily pass from the British to the German trenches across no man's land, scavenging in places where humans would lose their lives. There were some accounts of soldiers taming individual rats, feeding them and caring for them as pets. Some of the rats grew very bold and would enter the trenches to filch food from under the noses of the soldiers or out of their pockets. There was an indestructability about them and they also grew in huge numbers since soldiers were not allowed to waste ammunition on killing them.

Yet for very many soldiers rats were not just vermin but nightmarish creatures, a product of the squalor and unsanitary conditions. The idea of rats eating the bodies of fallen comrades aroused

⁴ Graves, R., (1929/1957) *Goodbye to All That*, London, Penguin, pp.116-117.

feelings of disgust and horror. So rats, breeding in huge numbers and swarming around the trenches became part of a spiritual distress at the way friends and comrades met their end. Some soldiers relieved feelings of frustration and boredom by baiting bayonets and trying to kill the rats, even though it was a futile exercise. Ferrets and terriers were also introduced to try and keep the creatures' numbers down.

How does a person cope with living among millions of rats? Rats which will consume your body if you die, or are too wounded to fight them off, rats which are, in effect, waiting to eat you? What would you do, be glad of their life and vigour or be filled with disgust and want to kill them? Are the overflowing rats of the trenches and no-mans-land gifts of creation or harbingers of hell? Both reactions are part of the spirituality of warfare and show us something about our inner selves.

Prayer

*God of all creatures,
we remember the rats that infested the trenches,
we remember that war breeds opportunity.
We remember too those who lived among them,
themselves like rats fighting for survival.*

Amen

Lice



Photo by roujo

Blaise Cendrars tells the story of one of his friends, Rossi, swearing and cursing as he hunted out the lice which infested his clothes.

‘Then you could see him undressing, inspecting the seams of his pants or the folds of his belly, and you could hear him swearing with rage when he crushed a whole colony of lice and larvae in the placket of his trousers or shouting with triumph when he succeeding in nicking out a crab from his pubic hair. Then he would take up his letter again, keeping one eye on his underwear. What the hell could the poor sod write to his wife or sweetheart, in conditions like these, except poetry?’⁵

The close proximity of soldiers in the trenches meant that there was no escaping the transmission of body lice. In conditions where it was difficult to wash properly or get clothes clean, lice lived easily in the seams of clothing and hatched into fresh colonies, despite the best efforts of the men to keep them at bay. Soldiers attempted to destroy them by running a candle flame along the seams, but no matter how hard they tried to get rid of them, the lice always came back. They also spread disease, causing trench fever and making men ill and miserable.

Cendrars however points us to two other important points about the lice which impact on the spiritual condition of the louse-infested men. First of all, Rossi wages his own private war against the lice. Unable to be sure whether he is able to make any difference in the larger war of which he is part, he is able to claim small victories over the lice attacking him. He cries out in triumph when he able to pluck out and kill the lice. In this way, the men were able to regain control over the small

⁵ Cendrars, pp. 10-11.

wars, to win little victories and so impose a kind of sense on the bigger, more incomprehensible war going on about them. Secondly, Cendrars makes an interesting observation when he says that Rossi could only write 'poetry' to his wife. The men would not detail the horrors of rats and lice in letters home, if you are going to spend time on a precious communication, you would write of higher human matters – love, reassurance, faith, promises.

This tells us something about the indomitability of the human spirit which will, if it can, find a way to rise above the senseless and seek to impose order and create beauty even in the midst of chaos.

Prayer

God of all that creeps upon the earth

*We thank you for the human spirit,
which chooses life over death,
love over chaos,
hope over catastrophe.*

*We thank you for the shared bonds of human friendship,
the camaraderie which brought people together,
the affection and love, the poetry
of letters home.*

Amen

Poppies



In 1916, a soldier, Private Cecil Roughton, picked a poppy from a front line trench on battleground at Arras and pressed it into a pocket notebook. That pressed poppy still survives, a direct link to that place of war and violence, where yet something beautiful endured. More significantly, it takes us to a person, who, in the midst of the business of war, could still be attracted by, and take trouble over, something that spoke of the unsullied beauty of God's creation and kept it safe against the damage and destruction. What did it mean to him? Just a souvenir, a particular moment, a whim? Or was it an act of defiance, saying something about the triumph of the human spirit, the human being, refusing the dehumanising effects of warfare?

In the satirical comedy series *Blackadder Goes Forth*, the episodes poked fun at a group of men stationed in the trenches trying (and failing) to make sense of their situation and trying, by any means possible, not to get killed. Yet in the final episode, after the characters discuss their hopes and fears for the future, they are forced at last to go over the top. As the camera switches from the trench to view the men emerging, crying out and running across no man's land amid fierce bombardment, their features blur and disappear, the shot turns into a quiet field of brilliant red poppies and the audience realises that despite their efforts, the characters are all dead. One reviewer called it 'the most sobering ending of any war film ever done'.⁶ What was interesting about

⁶ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0526712/reviews>

the reaction to the ending of this episode was the way the poppies, more than anything else, turned the comedy series into a serious reflection on the waste of life and the profound loss of gifted and unique human beings that war entails. Instead of laughing at the jokes, the audience mourned, taken into the reality and horror of war.

Why then has the poppy become such a powerful and enduring symbol of the First World War? And why does it carry such deep spiritual significance, enough to turn a comedy series into tears? Perhaps it is because it defeats the imagination to try and picture the carnage of the front line, the sheer scale of death and destruction, and our minds may balk trying to inhabit what we did not experience, - but we can imagine a field of poppies, as if the dead were transmogrified into something we can get a handle on, and through which we can mourn.

For the poppy's vivid red colour reminds us immediately of freshly spilled blood, and so recalls the death and injury that took place in those fields. The poppy's petals are fragile and do not last very long and so the flowers come to represent the bodies of the soldiers lost on the battlefields. Poppies grew in abundance in the fields of war and so a field of poppies gives a sense of the sheer number of men lost, as though all those dead were given their own individual memorial where they fell. We have found significance in those famous lines of John McCrae 'In Flanders fields the poppies blow/between the crosses, row on row' placing in our minds the link between the dead and the living and enduring flowers which become their memorial. On Remembrance Day the poppy wreaths laid at war memorials conjure up those associations and so connect us with an unimaginable past.

August 5th 2014 marked the beginning of an installation in the Tower of London Moat called 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red' , created by nearly 890,000 ceramic poppies to remember the British and colonial service personnel who died in the war. The last poppy was placed on Armistice Day, 11th November 2014. Nearly four million people had visited the Tower of London by that date prompting an extension of the hours of floodlighting to allow more people to see the exhibit. The sheer numbers flocking to see the poppies, some of whom left photographs and reminders of family members, shows the tremendous emotional and spiritual draw of the Tower's moat flooded with poppies. The poppy will continue to evoke in us a sense of loss and a way of imagining all those sacrificed lives.



Prayer

Creator God,

*You give each person the precious gift of life,
yet in war so many gifts are broken or come to perish.
Help us to look upon the poppies blowing in the fields
and see through them to the loss of human beings,
fathers, sons, husbands, brothers.*

*May we be thankful for our own gift of life
remembering those whose lives were taken from them.*

Amen