

St George's Windsor
9 October 2016
Twentieth Sunday after trinity

And as they went, they were made clean. These are words from today's New Testament reading about one of the many healing miracles of Jesus: **And as they went, they were made clean.**

Recently during the Windsor Festival, quite a large number of people from this community attended a concert held here in this Chapel. In the course of the concert, they heard an anthem that had been composed in commemoration of those who had been choristers who fell in the First World War. Called 'The Great Silence' and composed by Samuel Bordoli, the anthem had its very first airing in this place on 26th September. It was sung by the joint choirs of the Chapel Royal at St James's and at Hampton Court, the Chapel of the Savoy, and our own St George's Choir.

The words of the anthem were the whole of a very short poem (only eight lines) written by Ivor Gurney. Ivor Gurney (better known to many as a composer of songs, using almost always other people's words) seemed an appropriate provider of the text since he had once been a chorister in Gloucester Cathedral at the very time at which, in Cathedrals and Churches throughout the land, choristers, who were later to die in the Great War, had been singing. It is also the case that, as a fighting soldier, he wrote his short poem during the Battle of the Somme, which raged from 1st July until 18th November 1916; one hundred years ago. It might even have been the case (somebody will no doubt know!) that our concert here in St George's Chapel, marked precisely the hundredth anniversary of Gurney's crafting his few lines.

The poem begins, as you might expect of a sensitive soul in the midst of so much carnage:

Out of my sorrow have I made these songs,
Out of my sorrow;

And no wonder! More than one million people were killed or injured during the four and a half months of the Battle of the Somme in the course of which Gurney composed his songs. We know, for example, that in August 1916 he had 'just finished a setting of Masfield's "By a Bierside".....' writing to a friend that it had come 'to birth in a disused trench-mortar emplacement.'

Out of my sorrow have I made these songs,
Out of my sorrow;

But the following two lines transpose gently into a different key. The poet writes:

Though somewhat of the making's eager pain
From joy did borrow.

The poem (along with his songs) finds its origin in Ivor Gurney's anguish yet draws too, astonishingly given the circumstances, on something he calls 'joy'. The second half of the eight-line poem makes all clear.

Some day, I trust, God's purpose of pain for me
Shall be complete,
And then – to enter in the House of Joy...
Prepare, my feet.

Gurney will not allow the Battle of the Somme, and all that it involved in terms of human suffering, to have the dominant or final word.

Some day, I trust, God's purpose of pain for me
Shall be complete,
And then – to enter in the House of Joy...
Prepare, my feet.

I do not know the source of Ivor Gurney's conviction that 'one day', 'somehow', God will have completed His strange work with him and that he and will "enter in the House of Joy...", but I do know that it is said that he wrote his poem at 'Crucifix Corner'; one of many such-named places in France where, by the roadside, you would find a depiction of Christ upon the Cross, calling people to 'remember' and to 'understand'. To remember that God has shared our human suffering, and to understand, as he has declared in and through Christ's resurrection, that it is His way to use it all for some greater glory, and to heal it. Perhaps it was a crucifix that shed some light on Gurney as he wrote his verse.

And as they went, they were made clean. Earlier in this service, we heard an account of one of Jesus's many miracles of healing. Through our reading of the New Testament and our reflecting on the life of Jesus, we Christians have come to believe that it was Jesus's vocation to reveal to us the loving purposes of God. In and through his miracles of healing, he did so clearly. As, in time, his resurrection was to be a foreshowing of what God has in mind for us (that even our death shall be woven into victory), so each act of healing was a particular anticipation of a future in which all the downward-dragging and decaying forces of this life will be drawn into the upward-moving vortex of God's love.

Ivor Gurney's experience of the Battle of the Somme will seem, to most of us, very distant, though to the Korean veterans here today what he endured will be more

familiar. Yet, even if our own encounter with pain and suffering has been mercifully limited, our awareness of it in the lives of those around us will be sharpened by the frequency and ease with which nowadays we receive news from around the world. I think especially at this time of horrifying pictures of bombed Syrians and of drowning refugees.

Time and again, if our hearts are human, we are plunged into a kind of sorrow; sorrow but never despair. We never despair because such songs as we make to tell the stories of our lives always something from joy will borrow.

With Ivor Gurney, and on behalf of all who suffer, we find ourselves insisting:

Some day, I trust, God's purpose of pain for me
Shall be complete,
And then – to enter in the House of Joy...
Prepare, my feet.

If we do not despair, neither do we become sentimental, casual or careless; simply sitting back to wait for better times ahead. The hope we have in and through Jesus Christ inspires us to continue his work of healing in whatever ways we can, to bring the future that he promises into the present, and thereby to give hope to a world that so often, and quite understandably, seems cynical and lost.

The Right Reverend David Conner, KCVO
Dean of Windsor