

Reflections for Lent

A Suffering God?

Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy

[Mark 15.25-39](#), [click to view](#)

When I was ordained in 1975 I recall a discussion at an early deanery chapter about the decline of Remembrance Sunday. It was agreed by every priest present, of whatever age and experience, that its demise was guaranteed once the final veterans of the First World War died out. Those who served in the Second World War seemed to have less connection with it. The servicemen and women of the 1970s were more secular and had little experience of theatres of conflict, except in Northern Ireland. That discussion was an object lesson in the limited predictive powers of the clergy where the future of religion is concerned. No one imagined that 40 years later Remembrance Sunday would generate some of the largest congregations in the Church's year. The Falklands War marked an initial renewal. The Gulf War in the early 1990s and a series of later conflicts means that in the last generation there have been few years when the United Kingdom has not been suffering casualties as a result of active service. That is enough to explain the revival of Remembrance Sunday (and of the renewed keeping of the two-minute silence on Armistice Day). No secular replacement for this religious observance has ever been seriously canvassed.

In my early years as a priest, my unseen companion on Remembrance Sunday was Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy. Without his poetry I'm not sure I would have known what to say at that time. His poems were the first to cause me to shed tears as I read them.

In my theological training I had written a passionate defence of the impassibility of God, proving to my satisfaction (and with considerable help from Thomas Aquinas) that God did not suffer. If he did, he would not be God, but a creature subject to the vicissitudes of life like the rest of us. As an exercise in the philosophy of religion it fell like a satisfying intellectual defence. God was unchanging, transcendent, immortal, invisible. He was God only wise.

It was what Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy was taught. It is orthodox Christian belief. The experience of chaplaincy in the First World War, and his encounter with daily death and the serial suffering of the trenches, transformed his whole theological outlook. He became the First World War's most famous padre. He was known to everyone as 'Woodbine Willie' because of his ready distribution of cigarettes:

*They gave me this name like their nature,
compacted of laughter and tears,
a sweet that was born of the bitter,
a joke that was torn from the years.*

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But it wasn't a name in which he gloried. He felt his response to the men he served was often too superficial:

*Their name! Let me hear it - the symbol
of unpaid - unpayable debt,
for the men to whom I owed God's Peace
I put off with a cigarette.*

Studdert Kennedy described his harrowing work crawling from one corpse to another in the trenches reading the burial service and offering a shred of dignity and honour to those whose lives ended in horror, dirt and waste:

*And that night I'd been in trenches
seeking out the sodden dead
and just dropping them in shell-holes
with a service swiftly said.*

*For the bullets rattled round me,
but I couldn't leave them there,
water soaked in flooded shell holes,
reft of common Christian prayer.*

A figure emerges with a request of the padre:

*Then there spoke a dripping sergeant
when the time was growing late,
'Would you please bury this one,
'Cause 'e used to be my mate?*

His mate is a mess of earth and blood, barely recognizable. The service is said. A nearby explosion lights the face of the grieving sergeant as he stares at the 'crimson clot of blood', all that's left of his friend:

*There are many kinds of sorrow
in this world of Love and Hate.
But there is no sterner sorrow
than a soldier's for his mate.*

Studdert Kennedy returned after the war to the deprived parish of St Paul's, Worcester, to which he had been appointed just as war broke out. In 1922 he moved to London to run St Edmund, Lombard Street, but not to enjoy city life. He was also the public face of the Industrial Christian Fellowship, touring the country, addressing working people, promoting Christian socialism and speaking about the waste of war. The depression of the 1920s seemed poor reward for those who had survived the deprivations of the previous decade. Although a Catholic sacramentalist, Studdert Kennedy had evangelical fervour and sought to take

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Christ out of confining church buildings. He said, 'nobody worries about Christ as long as he can be kept shut up in churches. He is quite safe there. But there is always trouble if you try to let him out'. He was giving Lenten addresses in a Liverpool parish when he died in 1929, aged just 45. He was broken in health and disturbed by the triviality of post-war life and the hopeless inadequacy of the Church to meet the needs of the time. The world to which he returned after the war grieved him most. He knew that the suffering Christ identified with suffering humanity, but the gospel was unheard or ignored. Ineffective mission was part of the problem, but human beings had a terrible capacity to neglect what they most needed. His poem 'Indifference' captures the way Christ suffers again:

*When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,
they drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
they crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and
deep,
for these were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.*

*When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed Him by,
they never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
for men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
they only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.*

*Still Jesus cried, 'Forgive them, for they not what they do',
and still it rained the wintry rain which drenched Him through and through;
the crowds went home and left the street without a soul to see,
and Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.*

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you know the depths of despair and were nailed to the Cross by human cruelty; may all who are wounded and heartbroken know your presence with them and may we all be brought to your kingdom of peace.

Amen.

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DISCUSSION THOUGHTS:

1. Has anyone points they would like to raise from the reading?
2. What is meant by suffering? What kinds of suffering are there?
 - Mental, Physical, Spiritual
3. What is the purpose of suffering?
 - Snap back to reality
 - In touch with our own mortality; the important things
4. Is God really a “suffering” God? (see below)
5. Are we challenged by keeping “Christ shut up” -
 - In Churches
 - In our lives
6. Are we called as Christians to suffer? Matthew 10:22 , Luke 21:12
 - Romans 8:17 , 2 Corinthians 1:6 , Phillipians 1:29 , 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5
 - If so why?
7. In what ways can we/do we suffer?
 - Feeling abandoned by God
 - Family

Examples of God’s suffering:

CHRIST’S SUFFERING

1. In the wilderness. [Mathew 4:1-11](#) , [Luke 4:1-13](#)
2. The death of Lazarus. [John 11:1-44](#)
3. In the garden at Gethsemane. [Matthew 26:36-39](#) , [Luke 22:39-44](#)
4. At the hands of Pilate. [Matthew 27:27-31](#) , [John 19:1-3](#)
5. On the Cross. [Matthew 27:46](#) , [Mark 15:29-35](#)