

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 11th November 2018

'Exposure' by Wilfred Owen & Matthew 5: 38 - 48

Nothing happens. Nothing happens, Wilfred Owen writes, four times, capturing a side of war rarely remembered when, as we do every year, we remember the First World War. Nothing happened.

Over the past 100 years remembering the First World War and other wars there has often been a misunderstanding about Remembrance Day. Either people misunderstand Remembrance Day as a day when war is remembered as something glorious: the celebration of war as an ideal in the sacrificial struggle for liberty.

Or people misunderstand Remembrance Day as an opportunity to talk about peace, the refutation of war; a day to affirm our belief in peace as a way of life, and our determination to ensure that peace prevails.

But, Remembrance Day is about neither. War and peace are not the same thing; they are different things. So, Remembrance Day should be first and foremost about war, but not war as glorious sacrificial struggle. There is nothing glorious in Wilfred Owen's poetic description of being a soldier fighting in a war. Instead, Remembrance Day is an opportunity for us to reflect on our relationship to warfare: most importantly, who fights wars, but also why we fight; for what purpose we fight; should we fight.

In that respect Wilfred Owen, who was killed in the last days of the First World War, helps us to reflect on war from a very unusual point of view, an aspect of war that is so unusual that it often goes by unnoticed. Nothing happens. Owen's poem is not filled with the action packed, shocking images of: going over the top; gunfire; shelling; gassing; injury; marching; cheering; digging, that we so often see and read about the First World War in photographs, stories, other poems and much more.

Instead, Owen's poem about fighting a war is filled only with the crushing weight of waiting while being exposed to the weather, and beyond it, far away, the war itself.

Nothing happens in this poem, but of course, actually, something is happening; two things. 'We turn back to our dying,' he writes, and '... love of God seems dying'. It looks like nothing is happening, but he knows that slowly and surely amidst this waiting and weather death is happening: exposure to the weather and exposure to the war in the distance is killing the soldiers, and is killing love.

That's it. That's what Wilfred Owen wants us to remember about war. It is about dying: it is about people dying, not just in their flesh, but in their souls, in their spirit, in their culture, in their society.

No wonder then that Wilfred Owen asks at the end of the second stanza, 'What are we doing here?' His attempt at an answer to that question comes in the penultimate stanza. The soldiers are dying as a sacrifice to keep the home fires burning back in Britain so that the sun will continue to shine on child, field and fruit at home. And that is exactly what those who fought in that war believed back then that they were fighting and sacrificing their lives for freedom.

But, the poem, like so many others, makes clear that this sacrifice is far from glorious. It even questions whether this deathly sacrifice for a higher purpose makes a difference: what are we doing here; nothing happens, nothing changes. It is almost as if Wilfred Owen knows that the Second World War will follow in 20 years making this sacrifice feel pointless.

Sacrificial death may be a necessary thing, but can it ever be a glorious thing? The sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross may have been necessary, but can such a death ever be glorious? It is always right that today, we – especially we who are followers of Jesus Christ - should remember those soldiers and others who believed they were sacrificing their lives as a necessity, so that other people could live in freedom, particularly when those who laid down their lives weren't convinced that it would make any difference - nothing happens - or when they questioned why they were doing it.

Of course, when we pull back from this poem, which is so very tightly focused on soldiers in the trenches, and we look at the bigger picture we discover that a lot did happen as a consequence of the First World War. Nothing happens and the consequent question 'what are we doing here' doesn't adequately explain the dramatic changes that took place in British society in the years following the First World War, as the exhibition here at St. Ninian's shows.

But these changes were not the aims of the war, the war's goals. When we talk about soldiers sacrificing their lives, they didn't know they were sacrificing their lives for these reasons.

The First World War was called at the time The War to end All Wars, but of course it wasn't: nothing changes, nothing happens, for them only dying. Perhaps, we could argue that today, in 2018, it is inconceivable that Germany and France should fight another war as they continually did for hundreds of years prior to the First World War. Prior to the First World War an army crossed the Rhine in anger every single decade in recorded human history. It has been over seven decades now since that happened; something has happened, something has changed.

Nevertheless, presenting the European Union as an answer to Owen's question 'What are we doing here?' seems somewhat far removed from the sacrifice he and so many others in those two wars made. They would be justified in responded, really, was there no other way?

But nothing happens. What are we doing here? We turn back to our dying. For love of God seems dying. But nothing happens. I don't know, of course, but I imagine that those sentiments that run through Wilfred Owen's poem, could have

run through every soldier's mind serving on active duty at some point. But nothing happens. What are we doing here? We turn back to our dying. For love of God seems dying. But nothing happens.

As much as it is the right thing to do, to remember today those who sacrifice their lives in a war because they believe they are fighting for our freedom, we also have to answer their question: but, nothing happens, so what are we doing here. We also have to ask ourselves, is there no other way?

This year, 2018, 100 years after the end of the First World War is a particular good year to address that question because this year we can talk specifically about peace on Remembrance Day. After all, if 1914 was the year war broke out in Europe, then 1918 was the year that peace broke out.

If Wilfred Owen's poem reminds us that living in a war is about dying, and that whatever the reasons for fighting nothing seems to happen, then on this anniversary of the outbreak of peace we have to ask ourselves how can we live in peace and ensure that something happens in these peaceful years to ensure that war doesn't happen: how can we make peace glorious?

That is the question that Jesus' words address in our Gospel reading this morning. His sacrificial death, necessary not glorious, asks us how we make living in peace as a consequence of that death something glorious.

You have learned that they were told, "Love your neighbour, hate your enemies." But, what I tell you is this: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors ... If you love only those who love you, what reward can you expect?

On this commemoration of 100 years since the outbreak of peace in Europe, these words challenge us to ask ourselves how we can respond to Wilfred Owen's poem and make something happen in our society that changes the way we relate to one another as individuals, as a society, as countries so that something does happen that is different from what so often happens.

If Wilfred Owen's poem argues that war changes nothing, Jesus' words argue that the peace brought about by sacrificial death demands that we who commemorate that sacrificial death, change everything.

100 years on from the outbreak of peace in Europe, in 2018, the Scottish Government has set this year aside as the Year of Young People. In this Year of Young People, perhaps these words of Jesus that demand a change in the way we relate to each other are particularly significant. After all, wars are fought by young people, for the most part. The youngest combatant on the British side in the First World War was 12 years old; 250,000 soldiers were under age.

At the outbreak of the war no one could volunteer to fight who was over 40. Wars are fought by young people, it is they who are asked to sacrifice their lives. So, it is

for their sake that we should make sure that something happens in peacetime so that they never have to 'turn back to their dying' in war time.

In this Year of Young People, Jesus words from our Gospel reading this morning demand that we change the dynamic of our relationships from one that assumes other people, other countries, other societies are probably hostile enemies to be fought, to one that seeks to relate to other people, other countries, other societies as allies in the struggle to live in this world: fellow human beings to be loved.

In this Year of Yong People, this Remembrance Day this year is a message to all of us to make something happen in peacetime. It is a message to us who are older, and who hold power in our hands, to remember that it is those who are younger who bare the brunt of our failure to keep the peace. It is a message to those who are younger, and who hold the future in their hands, that says the world doesn't have to be like the world described by Wilfred Owen. It can be different. If we pursue it, work for it, sacrifice ourselves for it, it can be like the world described by Jesus.