

A sermon preached by Nigel Guthrie at Holy Cross, Crediton on 9 November 2014, 10.30am,
Remembrance Sunday
Readings: Micah 4:1-5, John 15:9-17

I'd like to read you a letter this morning that takes us back, nearly 100 years, to the First World War. It was written at the end of September 1917 by a local man, Second Lieutenant Henry John Friend, of the 8th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, from a trench in the front line. The letter is to his uncle who, along with the rest of Henry's family, were farmers from Higher and Lower Rewe in Shobrooke. I heard this letter read recently in our harvest service at Shobrooke church and found it very moving, not least the contrast between Henry thinking about the farm back in Shobrooke and the terrible conditions he was enduring in the trenches.

My Dear Uncle, I am sitting in a dug out with nothing in particular to do, except dodge the 4.2 and 5.9 shells that are flying liberally about; (three have just exploded & shook the hole up a bit, & another) one would think he desires to put us "out of mess"; .. he is at present quite enjoying himself shelling this ridge but of course as long as he doesn't hit the spot we are practically safe.

We are having splendid weather, and I hope it will continue, it makes all the difference to us who are in the lines.

Of course you will have finished harvest long before this, and I expect things are looking up pretty well on the farm. You know, I think I should like to get away from this for a while, & have a stroll with you over your farm, fancy I should enjoy it... what hopes! Well Uncle, amongst it all I can assure you it is grand, yea everything, to have such a God as our God, & such a Saviour: to tell Him all things, to pray about all things; what things have we to chance? War is a sickening business, yet he sustaineth; when one sees lying about in every direction over the shell torn ground in the moonlight, the upturned faces of the dead; somebodies loved ones, somebodies husbands, somebodies sons; then it is when one realizes most the awfulness of war, & feels sick & sorry for the sorrowing hearts at home, waiting for those whom they will never see again in this life, probably will never hear news of them.

I ought not to unfold the grim realities of war, so will change the subject: but of course, please don't breathe a word of anything like this to Mother.

I shall live in hopes of pleasant days, when the noises of war shall be a thing of the past; may God in His mercy speed that day. Now I must close, trusting yourself, Auntie & all my Cousins are quite well: as I am. May the peace of God which passeth all understanding, be our every portion. Please remember me kindly to all.

Your affectionate nephew, Henry.

Henry was killed just 5 days later on October 4th 1917, aged 22.

The installation of ceramic poppies around the Tower of London has reminded us all of the sheer horrifying scale of the casualties of the First World War. The poppies commemorate the 888,246 British casualties of the war. And that was only this country. Overall the First World War caused about 20 million military and civilian deaths.

It's hard to come to terms with these massive numbers but a letter like that of Henry Friend reminds us of the personal cost of the war to so many individuals, families and communities. There are three particular aspects of Henry's letter that struck a chord with me.

Firstly there is Henry's humanity. When he sees the upturned faces of the dead lying on the war-torn ground he realises that each one is somebody's husband, somebody's son and that brings home to him the awfulness of war. It reminds me of the Christmas truce which happened in the week before

Christmas 1914. It started with some German soldiers putting candles on top of their trenches and singing Silent Night. During this unofficial ceasefire, British and German soldiers sang carols across the trenches, there were some football matches and they even exchanged gifts and greetings. The truce showed that those directly involved in the war could put their military roles aside and see that those who were fighting were really just the same as them. There were some ceasefires the next Christmas, but it seems that the high command disapproved of it and after the terrible battles including that at the Somme in 1916 there were few further truces. But the high commands could not prevent those ordinary thoughts of humanity from surfacing in the minds of those like Henry Friend who were at the front line. It is well worth thinking about this when so much political energy is going into the debate about immigration. Where ever we stand in the debate (and it's not for me to comment on policy) we must never lose sight of the humanity of those who have come to this country, often with the honourable intention of helping their families to find a better life, and often providing essential services in this country. Whether it's the conflict of war or the heat of political debate we must always remember the common humanity we share with those who are different.

And secondly there are Henry's thoughts of home. He would have loved to have been out of those trenches and walking over the farm at Shobrooke with his uncle. It's good that he felt able to share something of the horror of his experience with his uncle. But at the same time he thought tenderly of his mother and didn't wish her to be upset by the thought of what he was enduring. I wonder what he might have written to her?

And thirdly Henry speaks of the value of his faith in God. We have no reason to think that Henry was a particularly religious man, but he clearly knew that God was with him and that he could speak to God in prayer and share with him the terrible experiences he was going through. We might have expected him to have blamed God for his awful situation, but instead he praises God and shows that he values the closeness of Jesus as his saviour and friend. Indeed he says it meant 'everything' to him that he could know that God was with him in the terror and trials of the trenches.

Our society has become rather uncertain and even sceptical of the value of faith. Sometimes Christians are even stopped by their employers from wearing small symbols of their faith such as a cross. But such attitudes show an underlying ignorance of the value of a personal faith, and what it can bring to individuals and to society. Knowing that God is with us and that we have a friend in Jesus can be an enormous strength when things are difficult. And having at the centre of our faith someone who lays down his life for others on the cross puts that spirit of sacrifice and service right in the centre of our life.

'Greater love has no one than this that a person lays down their life for their friends.' We heard those words from St John's Gospel in our second reading and in the anthem which the choir sang. This church, and those organisations to which many of you belong, rely on those who give up their time and energy freely to help others. The Christian faith tells us that this is more valuable than earning lots of money, having expensive possessions or achieving high position in society. Those many people who left this country from 1914 to 1918 also did so with the spirit of service of their country, and with a willingness to sacrifice their lives for the safety and security of their families and friends.

As we remember them today, and those who have been killed and injured in more recent conflicts, let us resolve to do whatever we can to make our world, including our own community, a better and more peaceful place for all God's children.