

Thought for the Week for publN 21/3/14
From The Revd Kevin Davies, Area Dean of Henley.

Lessons from the Great War.

In our Lent Study Group as part of the World War One Centenary we are looking at some of the theological issues raised by the conflict. "Does God take sides?" "What about the appalling suffering?" and so on, together with some of the responses of the Churches to the global crises of 1914-1918.

The national Church of England, for example, was almost wholly complicit and unquestioning, in its higher echelons, with the stated war aims of the government. But the responses of the many hundreds of Anglican chaplains on the ground, in the trenches, who experienced the fighting at first hand and in many instances showed astonishing courage, were altogether more thoughtful and nuanced.

The free churches were much more likely to have pacifists and conscientious objectors among their number, many of whom were prepared to be incarcerated for their faith, and pilloried as traitors by their local communities.

But it was a very sharp theological issue: it was almost universally accepted that the Germans were in the wrong to seek to dominate Europe, trampling the rights of the Belgians and the French. It was ironic that the Russians, whose support of Serbia in 1914 had dragged France, and then Britain in to war, made peace with the Germans and Austrians in 1917 after their own revolution, and effectively walked away, prolonging the war in the west by over a year.

Everyone freely blamed the Serb nationalists, and everyone claimed that God was on their side: the Ottoman Turks invoked a "jihad" against the infidels at Gallipoli; every German soldier's belt buckle was emblazoned with "Gott mit uns" (God with us) and here at home the appalling suffering and death in the trenches, and loss of life at sea, prompted Archbishop Randall Davidson to call for national days of prayer and repentance.

For some, the carnage destroyed their faith in God, for others it destroyed their faith in liberal idealism. After all it was not God setting army against army, man against man, nation against nation. In many cases mankind was simplistically labelling their own political aspirations as "God's will", and church leaders, wedded too closely to national power structures, both here and in Germany, were only too eager to bless the troops.

The war accelerated a process of unprecedented social change. The long lists of names on our village and town war memorials testify to a lost, largely agrarian, generation. The big houses which formerly supported the local economy were in many instances sold, or broken up. The rural church, which had often been hand in glove with that hierarchical social order, was cast into the wilderness. Only in the last twenty years, with the advent of home working and the internet, has the rural church begun to find its place once more in society, as people rediscover their need for belonging and meaning after the hedonism of the 60's-90's. The continued presence of the church in our towns and villages reminds us all of a time before the Great War, when we could in some senses still be described as "innocent", unsullied by the mass slaughter our mastery of technology unleashed.

The pertinent question in all this, however, is not one we ask of God: "where were You in all this?" It is one that God asks of us, as Russia mobilises, blaming Ukrainian nationalists, and America starts landing planes in Poland: "Have you learnt anything yet?"

Kevin Davies 12/3/14