

Futility

8 11 15

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds, –
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved – still warm – too hard to stir ?
Was it for this the clay grew tall ?
– O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all ?

Wilfred Owen

Our text may be found in today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 9 and verse 26: 'the sacrifice of himself.'

I'm not sure what experience you've had of war – whether or not you've ever served in one of the armed forces. I was born in 1949, four years after the end of the Second World War, ten years exactly after its declaration. I'm too young to

have done National Service. So what I know about fighting and serving my country in uniform comes strictly second-hand from TV, radio, films and books. And today, we've been fortunate to hear Dr David Norris read to us a well known poem by a well known poet who served and died in the First World War.

Wilfred Owen captures what it means to fight and die for our country. The poem is in two parts. The first about a single, dead soldier; the second about life in general.

The first part is sad, gentle, kind. Owen orders his men to carry their dead comrade out into the sunlight. He remembers that the soldier had always woken up in the past when the sun shone on him – back in England; then in France. There is the fond hope that if anything can wake him now from the sleep of death then 'the kind old sun will know'.

The second part is reflective and angry born of grief. Owen reflects on the life-giving quality of the sun: first on how the Spring sunshine encourages seeds to grow and then that, in the beginning, the sun gave life to the planet on which we live. But looking down at his soldier who's only just died, Owen questions why he can't be revived. And in his grief and distress at the death of his comrade, Owen wonders what is the point of life, of living, if untimely death is the end. Why? Why do 'fatuous sunbeams break earth's sleep at all?'

It's a good question, a hard question, and, as Christians, it's one we need to address. And the answer may be found in our understanding of a loving God who

loves us enough to give us life here on earth in the first place with the promise of life in the world to come. So here and now, we are necessarily mortal, time-limited. So there is the obligation to make the most of what we do by how we do it – the notion of service and respect and love of God and love of neighbour as we love ourselves. But, as you know, service can have a cost.

In terms of our text today – ‘**the sacrifice of himself**’ – we can see something of that cost. The cost is embodied in the story of the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection. That God in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, came among us and died for us and rose again that we might have new life – both here and now and in the world to come.

On this Remembrance Sunday, it has been a privilege to hear a little of what Owen witnessed in the frontline of the trenches. It was not easy for him to see the men with whom he served die fighting for their country. The question ‘what’s the point?’ should be asked but if we are properly called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice, then may we have the courage to do so.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew’s, Dinard

8th November, 2016

