

**St James' Church, Cambridge**

**Remembrance Sunday**

**9 November 2014**

**The Very Revd Peter Judd**

**Amos 5. 18-24**

“But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

Amos's call for righteousness is impressive but we can easily delude ourselves about righteousness.

On the famous Christmas Eve of 1914, when British and German troops fraternised in No Man's Land, a British and German officer were surprised to discover that they both thought they were fighting for righteous causes, the German officer saying: “Let us not argue about this tonight my friend.” Every German soldier's belt buckle had on it “Gott mit uns” – God with us and there's the infamous poem by Sir John Collings Squire that goes:

“God heard the embattled nations sing and shout ‘Gott strafe England’ and ‘God save the King’. ‘Good God said God I've got my work cut out’.”

But let me quote you two responses to the First World War, both thought to be righteous. Here's the Bishop of London, Arthur Winnington-Ingram in 1915. Standing on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral on an altar made of war drums, he said: “Band together in a great crusade – we cannot deny it – to kill Germans, to kill them not for the sake of killing but to save the world, to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young men as well as the old, to kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded as well as those who crucified the Canadian sergeant, who superintended the Armenian massacres, who sank the Lusitania, and to kill them lest the civilisation of the world should be killed.”

The Dean of St Paul's responded: “The mental processes of the Bishop are, for a man in his position, of almost childlike simplicity.” As the war dragged on, many remembered the word of the Bishop and many, in disgust, lost their faith.

But here's a contrast. When I went to be a curate in Salford, Manchester, the classic slum, inspirer of Lowry paintings and Coronation Street, almost everywhere I visited I'd see pictures of a young soldier in First World War uniform and another picture of an austere-looking clergyman, “the canon”, they called him. Peter Green was rector of St Philip's, Salford, from 1911 on. He was a prophetic man. He didn't share the heady optimism of the pre-war world:

“God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world.” With a sense of foreboding, he’d been preparing himself for some years. First he learnt German so that he could read German philosophers and writers and his studies led him to assert what is now commonplace – that Germany wasn’t alone in self-interest, self-glorifications and jingoism. All the nations of Europe had their share of the blame.

At the same time in the years before the war, he made a study of suffering and evil. He felt the problem of suffering and evil was increasingly a stumbling block to faith and so it was to become and has remained ever since. In this uncanny way, Peter Green was prepared for the war when it came.

His curate wrote of the night war was declared: “We sat up to hear the clock strike midnight with a sense of mounting excitement. The canon went to bed early. He knew what it foretold.”

When I was leaving Salford, a local vicar said that I’d do well to read Peter Green’s parish magazines. With the arrogance of youth, I was reluctant to do this. I wondered if Peter Green was all that he’d been cracked up to be. But eventually I did get all those dusty magazines out of the safe in the vestry and thought “let’s put this guy to the test and see what he had to say in September 1914”. It’s a test I’ve tried elsewhere, usually meeting the cliché that the war will be over by Christmas.

I shall never forget the moment when, sitting on the floor of the vestry, surrounded by bundles of parish magazines, I found September 1914, and this is what I read:

“Dear Friends, many people talk as if this war will not last long. They speak as if all will soon be well. I do not believe this. I believe that this war will not end until all the nations engaged are bled to exhaustion.” I remember my hair standing on end and thinking: “I shall have to eat my hat.”

And in preaching and teaching Peter Green took his people along the same route that he had taken in his own study of suffering and evil, beginning with the story of Cain and Abel – where one man murders his brother – telling them that the roots of violence and evil are not to be found out there in someone else but close at hand in my heart and yours.

And he led them through the Bible and the prophets to the cross of Christ where God and Christ face the agony of the world. From there he led them to a painful gospel of hope as in St Paul writing to the Romans:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ. Will hardship or peril or sword?

No. For I am convinced that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

What Peter Green was doing was exactly what was needed and rare in those days of heady optimism.

At the beginning of the war young workers and apprentices in Salford were signing up with great excitement to form a regiment called the Salford Pals. These Pals regiments sprung up all across the north of England and elsewhere. They were rapidly trained and shipped to France ready for the offensive on the Somme.

The Battle of the Somme was preceded by an unprecedented seven-day bombardment by the British on the German trenches. The British forces were told that nothing would survive such a bombardment. The German trenches would be destroyed as would all the barbed wire in No Man's Land. On the first day of the battle of the Somme when the bombardment ended at 7.30 am British troops were told to climb out of their trenches with all their equipment on their backs and to move across No Man's Land and past the German trenches to regroup and await orders.

It turned out that the German trenches were so deep and well-built that they were largely intact as was the barbed wire in No Man's Land. So when the bombardment stopped the German troops ran up the ladders to man their extremely efficient machine guns and what did they see? About 100,000 men advancing towards them who were soon struggling with impenetrable barbed wire. They were sitting targets. Most of the Salford Pals were killed in the first half hour of the battle of the Somme. There were 60,000 casualties that day. Every household in Salford was directly or indirectly affected which accounts for all those photographs staring out at you from the mantelpieces.

In a nutshell, the weapons of the First World War were very sophisticated, the communications were not. If someone had had a mobile phone they could have contacted headquarters behind the lines and had the whole thing called off. No such luck.

It is well documented that the Church of England and its clergy, with notable exceptions, were ill prepared for the First World War. After the initial optimism, as the grim realities became apparent, the clergy were theologically and sacramentally ill-equipped to cope. Stoddart Kennedy at the front and Peter Green in his parish were among those notable exceptions.

And Peter Green went on in his prophetic way. He got a lot of stick for arguing for a generous peace from the allies lest the seeds of an even greater war should

be sown. Again, how right he was. And in the same parish from 1939 he went through it all again except this time the bombs fell on his own parish and on his own church and many were killed there including his own curate. And again he led his people to the cross of Christ to its reconciliation through suffering and death to its hope. I wasn't surprised to read in David Edwards' book "The Leaders of the Church of England" where he describes Peter Green as the greatest parish priests the Church of England has ever produced.

"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream" and if it came to it, the Bishop of London or Peter Green, I know whose example I would want to follow.