

UNA Sermon

(following a viewing of www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBHT3dBswOM)

The song we have just heard, variously known as 'No Man's Land', 'The Green Fields of France' or simply 'Willy McBride' was written in 1975 by the folk singer, Eric Bogle. Thinking about the words, especially the later verses, it's possible to see that it could not really have been written much earlier than it was. It needed some time to pass before he could write the words 'Willy Mc Bride, it's all happened again and again and again and again and again', which are in many ways the most compelling, if not tragic, words in the song.

The song has been responded or reacted to in a variety of ways over the years since it was written. There has been the attempt to identify the actual Willy McBride the song refers to and a number of possible candidates have been found amongst the war graves in France but it has also been remarked that the existence of the actual Willy Mc Bride is not really necessary and that Eric Bogle needed a name that rhymed with graveside. The suspicious part of me wonders if the search on the part of some might not have been motivated by the hope that they could prove that there was no Willy McBride and that that would discredit both Eric Bogle but more importantly the sentiments of the song itself because the uncomfortable facts of the millions who died is also, for some, an inconvenient fact that it may be hoped will be blurred by the passing of time but the Cambridge historian Christopher Clark describes it all in chillingly succinct language.

"The European continent was at peace on the morning of Sunday 28 June 1914, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie Chotek arrived at Sarajevo railway station. Thirty-seven days later, it was at war. The conflict that began that summer mobilised 65 million troops, claimed three empires, 20 million military and civilian deaths, and 21 million wounded. The horrors of Europe's 20th century was born of this catastrophe. It was, as the American historian Fritz Stern put it: "The first calamity of the 20th century, the calamity from which all other calamities sprang."

Nevertheless, reactions against the song there certainly have been. The dismissing of any anti-war movement as being unpatriotic has always been vocal and was certainly so in the 70s. More recently a counter version of the song in the context of the conflict in Afghanistan was written by Stephen Suffet, which is Willy McBride's reply to Eric Bogle in which Willy says,

*It's easy for you to look back and sigh,
And pity the youth of those days long gone by,
For us who were there, we knew why we died,
And I'd do it again, says Willie McBride.'*

That is in contrast to the comment of Harry Patch the last surviving soldier to fight in the first world war who died in 2009 at the age of 111. Not long before he died he was asked in an interview if the lives lost in the war had been worth it, 'no, not one life was worth it' was his reply.

If the song has done nothing else it has certainly stirred up discussion and inevitably, disagreement as there has been debate about the reasons for and the avoidability of the war. Some historians see it as a gradual slithering into war while others attribute it to deliberate intention rooted in nationalistic expansion.

I am not a historian and I don't intend to get into that debate but I do want to reflect that a good deal of critical reaction to the song often comes from the desire to build up and defend a sense of national pride and a spirit of patriotism, in the context of which it may be deeply unpopular to suggest that rather than talking of millions of young men giving their lives in a fine cause, instead we should say that their lives were taken from them in a totally unnecessary and wholly avoidable bloodbath. Patriotic fervour requires a certain approach to language which it is important to recognise.

Perhaps to at least try to be fair to those politicians and military strategists who made the decisions we have to admit that they were hardly doing anything new and it was only gradually as the scale of what had happened became clear that significant numbers of people began to ask significant questions and much of that has happened in the years following the war. But there were voices even before the conflict began that warned of the outcome. In 1914, the Revd Otto Umfrid, a leading German pacifist, spoke about the impending conflict with words that ask serious question of what it actually means to be patriotic. He wrote:

'If the war faction in Germany actually succeeds in rushing us into this terrible future war, and if the blood of the young men of Germany who have been torn apart then lies there on the battlefield, then perhaps the German people will find an answer to the question of whether the person who loves the fatherland more is the

one who did everything within his power to prevent this horror, or the one who sowed blood and harvested blood from it. Whether they will shout their cheers when he comes riding on his stamping steed across the charnel fields of the future, while the ghost of hunger grins from ruined huts?

Uncomfortable words like that seem remarkably difficult to take serious notice of, except when it is too late. One of the problems has so often been that at certain levels of decision making, individuals have to become chess pieces to be moved around the board knowing that some or many will be lost.

We have made *some* progress in the years since. There are centres for Peace studies and conflict resolution that have developed great expertise and we no longer shoot soldiers for cowardice. Instead we have come to understand the reality of post-traumatic stress but at the same time we have developed new technologies of war such as drones that allow our soldiers even to be completely physically isolated from the battlefield (even if not emotionally) all designed to protect our side whilst destroying the enemy with what is hoped is surgical precision. The problem is that very little of that really addresses root causes and especially the dangers of what we might call the 'wrong kind of patriotism'.

Which brings us to the prophet Amos and a more local character too who I'll speak about in a moment. But first Amos. His tirade is directed at a populist mentality that looked forward to the 'Day of the Lord', a time when God would intervene on the nation's behalf, defeat their enemies and make everything just fine, for them. Read the whole of the prophecy of Amos and you draw the conclusion that the nation's mindset has become so inward looking, self-indulgent and complacent that they believed that as long as they kept the feasts and the rituals God would be on their side but Amos, just as the other prophets persistently do too, points out that there is an inescapable link between being concerned for the nation's welfare and issues of justice, compassion and righteousness. In other words, if you really want to live in peace, you have to build it and build it on the right foundations.

Which brings me to my local character. Some of you may know the story of Edwin Robertson. During the second world war he was the minister of Dagnall Street Baptist Church in St Albans. A fluent German speaker he had strong links with members of the confessing church, the part of the German Church that even before the war began had opposed the rise of national socialism producing a strong statement known as the Barmen declaration. After the war he was put in charge of the

religious affairs division of the British administration in occupied Germany and worked closely with the leadership of the German church which was drawn from the survivors of the confessing church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had, of course, been executed months before the end of the war but Martin Niemoeller and others had survived and were the obvious leaders of a church and in a country that had to attempt to come to terms with what had happened and which the church, with the exception of the confessing church, had not only allowed to happen but in many cases had even blessed because they had confused nationalism with Christianity.

He made a suggestion that was to have lasting consequences. In talking with the leadership about how they would be able to reflect on what had happened he suggested that they should restart a small conference for lay people that had existed before the war as a forum for reflection and discussion. They took his advice with the result that what is now the Kirchentag was created.

The Kirchentag has grown to a scale where every two years tens of thousands of people gather in a major German city to engage with a huge range of issues all of which, in one way or another are an aspect of peacebuilding, from climate change to interfaith dialogue. It dominates not only the church's agenda but is featured heavily in all the German media. In the Berlin Kirchentag 18 months ago Barak Obama and Angela Merkel talked together at the Brandenburg gate in a meeting before a hundred thousand people about ways forward in international politics, which was televised across the whole of Germany and even made it into the British media but interestingly without any reference to its context.

Learning how to listen, discuss, debate and disagree in a way intended to build up understanding rather than simply defeat an opponent in argument has been a characteristic of the Kirchentag since its inception and sheds light on one of the central challenges to the resolution of conflict and peacebuilding as well as holding up a mirror to us to allow us also to recognise one of the elements of the path to war. That is not so much the use as the abuse of language; the distortion of the way in which we communicate and attempt to influence the thinking of people and colour attitudes to others and the decisions that we are then led to make and in short teach people to hate.

In contrast to that, being aware of how we speak about and to one another is also an essential component in our understanding the admonition of Jesus that we should love our enemies.

Loving one's enemies, that most radical of Jesus' teachings does not mean have warm cuddly feelings for them, the Greek word that is used is the word *agape* which has the much more practical meaning of being concerned for someone's welfare, 'continued benevolence' is one interpretation, or 'seeking the best for' and an essential element of that is the way in which we use language and whatever other forms of communication we have at our disposal to build bridges rather than resort to the use of emotive slogans, prejudicial labels or easy stereotypes in order to erect barriers.

Regrettably, tragically, such is the kind of abuse of communication that there has been far too much of in international as well as domestic politics for a very long time but especially in recent times because of the nature of how we communicate it has become more and more intense. Whether it be the deliberate use of lies or the appeal to national or individual self-interest using language and imagery designed to trigger immediate and unthought responses it seems that we are living in the middle of a battlefield, not a physical one but a verbal one where victory and dominance rather than peace is the aim.

It is very appropriate then to reflect on the nature and purposes of the UN as a forum for the building up of peace. And let's not just use the abbreviation instead but think about its full designation and where the emphasis belongs. I sense that I usually hear it spoken of as the **United Nations** I suspect that those visionaries who were first involved in its creation may have put the emphasis differently **United Nations**.

We need, desperately need, a culture shift from talk of us and them, a shift to speaking of **United Nations**. The world is now too small, too interconnected in almost every way imaginable and too dangerous a place for that and the role of the UN in facilitating such a culture shift is increasingly important even while some would want to see it as increasingly irrelevant because it challenges their personal agendas.

In 1971 the General Assembly proposed that each member state should mark the anniversary of the founding of the UN with a public holiday. I am not sure whether any state has ever done that and it is probably futile to attempt to get it implemented but perhaps the attempt should be made. More important though, is for the forum of the United Nations to be encouraged and strengthened as a place where words should be offered to one another as gifts, even in disagreement, rather than wielded as weapons. Such a culture shift as that is one that presents a challenge of self-discipline to world

leaders as well as to all of us to think carefully as we speak and to speak with humility and not with arrogance.

The churches, in their ecumenical relations and other faith groups too as well as other institutions and organisations have learned much in recent years about how to offer words as gifts and something of how to receive them – even when the actual practice has left something to be desired.

To build peace for the future there needs to be a culture shift which brings to the fore an unaccustomed and to some unwelcome humility in the way we speak to one another, about one another and deal with one another.

We gather here in a Christian setting although, of course, the United Nations comprises peoples of many faiths and none so it is hardly appropriate to use Christian theology or passages as it were as ammunition in some conflict between world views. Instead there is a practice known as scriptural reasoning takes a theme and brings people of different faiths and passages of different scriptures together to share what they have to say about that theme as a way to build understanding and to share encouragement. I'd like to offer something into that.

It would seem to be wrong to mark either centenary of the end of the first World War or the anniversary of the founding of the UN without wanting to share something of hope. My offering comes not from the Bible but from the pen of Studdert Kennedy, Woodbine Willie as he was known when he served as a Chaplain to the troops in the trenches. He knew the horrors of the conflict first hand and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery. He was also a poet as well as a priest and in the midst of the war he was still able to write these words.

I see

*All history pass by, and through it all
Still shines that face, the Christ Face, like a star
Which pierces drifting clouds, and tells the Truth.
They pass, but it remains and shines untouched,
A pledge of that great hour which surely comes
When storm winds sob to silence, fury spent
To silver silence, and the moon sails calm
And stately through the soundless seas of Peace.
So through the clouds of Calvary--there shines
His face, and I believe that Evil dies,
And Good lives on, loves on, and conquers all--
All War must end in Peace. These clouds are lies.
They cannot last. The blue sky is the Truth.
For God is Love. Such is my Faith, and such
My reasons for it, and I find them strong
Enough. And you? You want to argue? Well,
I can't. It is a choice. I choose the Christ*