

## WW1 Armistice Anniversary. 11/11/2018.

### Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed  
through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped  
behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*

Wilfred Owen. 1893-1918.

This was a reality which was a far cry from what the boys and men who marched away to the First World War expected. They were going to be part of 'the great game'. They were participating in the great adventure. They were going to see the world and 'biff the Kaiser on the nose'.

Dulce et decorum est, pro Patria mori ... How sweet and fitting it is to die for your country ... was part of the propaganda which sent millions into bloody conflict. The line comes from a poem by Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known to the modern world as Horace, a Roman who lived in the first century BC and who wrote these words to encourage young men to take up arms against the enemies of Rome. How ironic that Italy started the First World War siding with Germany, though they did later change sides.

That these words were taken and believed and used is shown in how many war memorials include them, as a statement about the glory achieved by those who had died. Grief sometimes overcomes rationality.

There was a lot of triumphalism that sent young men, and women serving as nurses, off to the battlefields of Turkey, the Middle East and the Western Front. The reality, as recorded in the poems of Owen and others, such as Siegfried Sassoon, shocked people as much as the accumulating horrible loss of life.

Even worse were those who returned and who were never the same again, tormented by what they had seen and all that had happened to them and their mates.

Another poem by Wilfred Owen describes the horror of this in stark terms. Some soldiers began to long for a wound which would be enough to take them home, away from the battlefield, a wound called a 'blighty'.

### The Chances

I mind as 'ow the night afore that show  
Us five got talking, — we was in the know,  
"Over the top to-morrer; boys, we're for it,  
First wave we are, first ruddy wave; that's tore it."  
"Ah well," says Jimmy, — an' 'e's seen some  
scrappin' —  
"There ain't more nor five things as can 'appen;  
Ye get knocked out; else wounded — bad or cushy;  
Scuppered; or nowt except yer feeling mushy."

One of us got the knock-out, blown to chops.  
'T'other was hurt, like, losin' both 'is props.  
An' one, to use the word of 'ypocrites,  
'Ad the misfortoon to be took by Fritz.  
Now me, I wasn't scratched, praise God Almighty  
(Though next time please I'll thank 'im for a  
blighty),  
But poor young Jim, 'e's livin' an' 'e's not;  
'E reckoned 'e'd five chances, an' 'e's 'ad.  
'E's wounded, killed, and pris'n'r, all the lot —  
The ruddy lot all rolled in one. Jim's mad.

War is a terrible thing. There is a long history in Christian thought of wrestling with the reality of human conflicts, and especially in how to oppose an evil foe using deadly force to persecute the vulnerable. The idea of a 'just war' has a long and comprehensively argued history. It may be that there are wars which need to be fought, though there is never any such thing as a good war. And, as author Bryce Courtney weaves into some of his novels of conflicts in southern Africa, "war makes monsters of us all." Warfare often takes away perspective. It removes a sense of common value. Opponents are demonised, even to the point where they are considered less than human, less so than ourselves, of lesser value.

Archbishop Robert Runcie, at the service to celebrate the end of the Falklands War, outraged the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, when he prayed for those who had lost their lives on the Argentinian side, for their families and all who had suffered. For Mrs Thatcher and for many of the critics of Archbishop Runcie, it was only one side of the conflict which deserved prayer and attention and compassion. It is quite right and vitally important that we remember this example set by Archbishop Runcie.

We remember those who fought. We are thankful for the end to the hostilities and the hopes for peace, even though the unjust and punitive Treaty of Versailles at the end of the First World War made the Second World War an inevitability. We remember those who died, and their families and all who were affected by this terrible time. We remember those who returned to a changed world. We remember those involved from this area, from this country, from the allied forces AND from all countries involved in the conflict, even those drawn in from the opposing sides.

As Australians we know some of that mutual compassion if we have been to Gallipoli or studied the events of the Gallipoli campaign. On the beach at Anzac Cove there stands a memorial with these words:

*Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives ... You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours ... You, the mothers who sent their sons from faraway countries, wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.*

These words were attributed to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk who commanded the Ottoman forces in the campaign and went on to rule and shape modern Turkey.

At 11am on the eleventh of November 1918 (Paris time) the battles officially stopped. It was too late for so many. Wilfred Owen was killed only a week before, on 4 November 1918. That first Armistice was the first of three which continued until the Treaty of Versailles took effect on 10 January 1920. As many have heard me say, that is why war memorials have various years for the ending of that war, 1918, 1919 and 1920.

We remember. And we pray for an end to the attitudes and prejudice and greed which lead to war. We remember. And we pray and strive for greater openness and compassion and understanding between peoples from different backgrounds and cultures. We remember. And we pray for courage among those who oppose tyrants and leaders who would take us again into unjust and destructive paths.

When compassion fails, prejudice rises and fear is used as a political tool may we have the courage to speak out against short sighted politicians who would draw us into the levels of hatred and ignorance which led to the conflict which we remember this day. May there be peace, peace which is the presence of justice and mercy, compassion and understanding, respect and trust and love.

Amen.

**Paul Mitchell**