

Sermon preached at the Commemoration service for those fallen in the Battle of the Somme at All Saints Church, Boyne Hill, Maidenhead 10th July 2016

Texts Ephesians 1: 11- 23 and Matthew 5:1-12

Every Christmas Christians celebrate with joy the incarnation. God entering this world in the form of a servant or a baby boy who would grow to be a man that would bring healing, reconciliation and hope. Children with their families pack this church (And most Churches across the land) to share in the crib service. A few days later another service takes place (though not in all churches). It's called the Holy Innocents day. It's hidden away with good reason and tells us of Herod the Great seeking the Magi to locate the one 'who has been born King of the Jews'. Herod wanted to eliminate Jesus and when the Magi tricked him he asked that all male children under the age of 2 in and around Bethlehem should be killed. It would seem the bad news story is hidden with good reason.

If you visit Windsor Castle you will find in the Royal Collection of the King's dressing room a painting of the Massacre of the Innocents. By Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The artist painted the horrors of the story. Shortly after it's creation the painting came into the possession of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II in Prague. The slaughtered babies were painted over with details such as food and animals covering the horrors of the massacre. It was decided during the conservation treatment in 1988 to leave the more substantial alterations to the figures. It was covering up bad news.

Bishop Stephen Cottrell in his book 'Walking backwards through Christmas' takes the passage of scripture and uncovers the bad news. He describes a mother trying to hide her 10 month old baby boy, her first born, her joy, a boy that has not yet learned how to walk or speak or fear. He is born into a world that can be trusted. He will look into his killers eyes with innocent love. His mother wanted him to know the joys of loving and being loved for many of the world's ills stem from never knowing you are loved. I leave you to read the horrors of the mothers' story but Cottrell brings alive in the one boy the stories of the masses.

This leads me to the Battle of the Somme and the 1st day when 19,240 British soldiers died and 57,470 casualties in all. By the end of the Battle that the Legion Standard defines as tragedy, waste and futility of the 1st World War 1,000,000 from this conflict had been killed, captured or wounded.

Amanda Slater from Coventry was in Thiepval last weekend to honour the great uncle she never knew she had who died in this Battle at the age of 18. 'When you see the memorial with all those thousands of names it is very difficult to comprehend what it all means. But when you get to know one of those names you realise the others must have been the same. They set out with optimism and ended up with the worst horror you can imagine. The woman described by Cottrell would surely have said the same about the Holy Innocents.

So today through the excellent labour of love of Ken Smith we discover a story of one man who had optimism and ended up knowing horror and in so doing we bring alive not just one man's story by like Cottrell with the Innocents the lives and hopes of all people who lost their lives in this terrible Battle. In remembering this man we remember the 20 other brave men from this parish, the 10 from Holyport and the 1000's of others who perished.

This man's name was John Walton Bamber (Jack). His memorial is behind me as I stand in this pulpit. It look's forwards towards ST Augustine and back's onto the curate's stall. Also behind me is a cross that was given by the Anderson family in memory of John. This is interesting because as Ken Smith suggests, Bamber was a theological student at St Augustine's college and was hoping to be ordained and to preach the Gospel of Christ. He was born in Ladysmith, South Africa and one of the early

stories when Jack was 13 was of he and his brother Cyril helping their mother a volunteer nurse to care for the sick and wounded during the Ladysmith siege. John was known to cheer up and care for the sick by talking and listening to them. He refused to follow his mother after a while as he was upset at losing all he liked.

John later matriculated at Maritburg College and following active service in South Africa he decided to attend theological college at St Augustine's in Canterbury. We discover from his application form that John was baptised in St John's mission church in Ladysmith and confirmed on All Saints Day 1903 in St Saviour's Cathedral, Natal. He was a chorister, altar server, Sunday school teacher and licensed lay reader. Having started his training for the priesthood at St Augustine's we find a letter dated 22nd January 1915 where he is informing the warden that the Bishop of Natal urges him to join the Army and not to continue studying for the priesthood until the Empire is out of danger. John is filled with confidence by the Bishop's words and writes 'I am ready to suffer and I pray God to give me his grace to endure all hardships manfully and in a Christ-like manner. My only fear is that I should not bear witness to the master faithfully.

Bamber by now is in the 10th Battalion Kings own Yorkshire Light Infantry and in late January 1915 joins his men in Maidenhead. John starts attending All Saints, Maidenhead and we hear how the chaplain informs him that there are no confirmation candidates from his battalion. John talks to the boys (As he puts it) and 17 come forward from 60 to begin classes. 24 are already communicants and John takes 30 of his men to Holy Communion on Easter day in this church at 7am on the 4th April, 1915. The people of Maidenhead were impressed with the behaviour of the Battalion and had held Bamber in high regard for the treatment and care of his men. On the 23rd April 1915 John writes 'If I may trespass upon your good nature..' asking the sub-warden of St Augustine's if he will look after some of his papers as Jack goes off to war.

Jack as you will have heard from the letter read to us by Capt Paul Monk met a girl, fell in love and became engaged. Her name was Doris Anderson of Castle Hill. We are thrilled to day as we welcome Doris' son Nick Maine for this commemoration service.

On the 25th July 1916 Adele Anderson the mother of Doris in a letter to the sub-warden at St Augustine's wrote ' We were such friends, I feel his loss very much and can hardly believe we shall never see his face or hear his voice again. God's ways are strange to take him in the very height of his happiness. She says of her daughter's love for John. Their love was of such a character that I am hoping the wound is not too deep to heal.

Doris' memoirs say 'There came a friend. I loved with a deep and holy love. I think that in all my life I never have nor never will love anyone so deeply. He was killed and he is still part of my life, my thoughts and my prayers.

On the 12/7/1916 the chaplain in France wrote to the warden. Lt Bamber fell gallantly leading his company on the 1st line German trenches on Saturday 1st July 1916. It was a great blow to me his death. He was such a bright and enthusiastic spirit whose whole hope and outlook was the church. He eagerly looked forward to the time when he would give himself wholly to the ministry.

The chaplain goes on 'I always felt his temperament was a little unearthy. He seemed a visitor rather than a resident.' He made his last communion 2 days before his death.

We move to the scriptures John loved and cherished. In the Beatitudes we find the idea of living life as if the best is yet to come. People like Bamber are happy and confident in living their lives as if the

best is yet to come. Of course on earth mourners go uncomforted, meek don't inherit the earth, those who seek justice often carry that to the grave.

Bamber believed in the world to come 'Perhaps he says we should learn what love is before we enter that Greater love to come.' Bamber knew what it was to live in the present in a way that makes sense of God's promised future found in Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians we find that hope explained. No longer will people be foreigners or strangers but accepted into a new community. Paul is saying that both Jew and Gentile will both be part of the Family in Christ.

Instead of viewing the world through hostile eyes we will see each other made in God's image. God through the incarnation, his life, his death and new life sends his spirit to us. He is a vulnerable stranger in us. Will we accept him and live lives worthy? Bamber said as he set off to War 'My only fear is that I should bear witness to the master faithfully.

I think he did live life faithfully and he believed in the communion of the Saints where he invited Doris to share with him at the altar of St Paul's and All Saints and in the Kingdom to come.

I hope that his life has brought alive the lives of the 20 others from this parish and the 10 from Holyport as well as the 1000's of others who lost their life in the Somme. We pray too that the hope Bamber had of a future world where all will see each other made in God's image as no longer enemies but as neighbours will come true.