



The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
3 August 2014

Testament of Lament

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Genesis 32.22-31; Romans 9.1-5; Matthew 14.13-21

We don't know how to talk about the First World War. If we speak of mindless slaughter, we risk naiveté in the face of the global politics of the early twentieth century. If we speak of courage and sacrifice, we risk glorifying the ugliness of carnage and the crimes of bungled generalship. If we look at Flanders fields of white crosses or litter our memories with red poppies we risk making abstract what was a personal scar on almost every household in the country. If we condemn and moralise we risk implying that somehow today we know better, and we fear dishonouring those who had to do and die and didn't get any say in the reasoning why. So our carefully-crafted minutes of silence mask our dumbfoundedness about how to express horror, how to honour bravery, how to recognise grief, how to acknowledge folly, and how to confess the little we have learned.

In 1933 Vera Brittain, whose commemorative plaque stands in our Dick Sheppard Chapel in the crypt downstairs, published her memoir, *Testament of Youth*. It covers the years 1900-25 in the life of a young middle-class woman, and thus gives us a glimpse of her story before, during, and after World War One. The early chapters give us a picture of a life that we could look back on as calm and flourishing – but the tremors beneath the surface are clear. Vera's father is a paper manufacturer. Straightaway we have two key dimensions of Britain's pre-war character: a nation dominated by the empire that drove the nation's economic ambitions and cultural identity, and by the razor-sharp class struggles that were rearing up at the time war broke out. Meanwhile Vera's longing to go to Oxford embodies the suppression of women's gifts and flourishing in a stifling era of social conformity and control. Let's not forget that a lot of people saw the outbreak of war as a moment of opportunity to transform a lot of things in this country that we might now recognise as ripe for change.

Vera adores her brother Edward, and takes to her heart his three closest friends, Roland, Geoffrey and Victor. Indeed she falls in love with Roland, and he becomes her fiancé. It's because of her devotion to these four men that she finds herself drawn into the innocent idealism of those who enter the war with spirit and relish. She is caught up in the language of glory, and later reflects, 'The War made masochists of us all.' But the heart of Vera's testimony lies in the harrowing account she gives of the way first one, then another, then finally all four of these young men she loves meet their end in the conflict. Most painfully, she eagerly picks up the phone one night before Christmas, expecting to hear of her beloved Roland's anticipated return home for the holiday season – only to be told that he is dead. He was 20 years old.

The loss is overwhelming. She says, 'There seemed to be nothing left in the world, for I felt that Roland had taken with him all my future and Edward all my past.' One night, she says, 'Too miserable to light a fire or even to get into bed, I lay on the cold floor and wept with childish abandon. "Why couldn't I have died in the War with the others?" I lamented ... "Why couldn't a torpedo have finished me off ... I'm nothing but a piece of wartime wreckage, living on ingloriously in a world that doesn't want me!"'

We see Vera's efforts to play her part in the war effort – to live a life worthy of the men who are sacrificing so much at the front. She worked in London, France and Malta, making no pretence it was her natural calling, and wearing herself out in offering care and compassion. But we also see

another side of what it was like not to be among the soldiers who were and are at the centre of the world's attention about the war. It was impossible to voice dissent about the struggle without seeming disloyal to swathes of sacrifice and appearing to dishonor the dignity of the dead. Thus the madness of slaughter multiplied in the face of the powerlessness of the onlookers.

Testament of Youth, and its sequel Testament of Experience, also show us what life was like after the war. Vera's fury and energy are unabated: she becomes a passionate pacifist and turns her stricken grief into desire for no repetition of the ghastly curse that stole her most precious relationships from her. She feels deeply the outrage that so many households passively let their sons be taken away to die, like sheep going to market. She lost her heart and soul in the war – but we become aware that many others remember differently, or desire to forget more assiduously. Despite her voracious and undying longing for Roland, Vera eventually settles to marry another man, Gerald, and in that marriage we see both realism and a different kind of love. And yet Gerald has to live with the reality that Vera's heart will always be shaped by her love for Roland and Edward and she will never outgrow the circumstances of their loss. The war, for Vera, will never end. Likewise Vera's father can never come to terms with his son Edward's death and commits suicide in 1935. He too feels like a piece of wartime wreckage, living on ingloriously in a world that doesn't want him. The shards of war stretch deep and woundingly into an indefinite future.

We also, in following Vera's life, come to dwell on what one does with such a profound experience as the decades pass. Vera takes up other causes that to her share a trajectory with her pacifism – she protests for peace and nuclear disarmament and against colonialism and apartheid. Here lies a challenge to quantify how much the experience of the First World War was unique, and how much it was part of a larger struggle and what that struggle might mean today.

Vera Brittain. Think about that name. Vera. It means true. Brittain. It means the country we're sitting in right now. It's a name that pushes us to see this testimony as the story of what the First World War truly meant to the people of this country. It's not primarily about an Archduke shot in Sarajevo, or alliances made by colonial-dominated empires, or the logistics of trench warfare, or the Russian Revolution, or most of the things that history records. It's about a broken heart, a sense of being stricken beyond recovery, a life dominated by might-have-beens, an open wound that could never truly heal, a decimation of a generation of young men who could have been the light and life of the world, an immeasurable weight of grief among those who missed them and whose lives were dislocated beyond measure by war. Vera Brittain. Britain's true story.

But think also about the name Vera Brittain chose for her account: *Testament*. It's the name we give to each of the two parts of the Bible. It's a challenge to the reader to set Vera's account alongside what we call scripture, and see what the one says to the other. The nineteenth century was a time of great confidence in human capability. The philosophy of the Enlightenment and the growth of science and the range of technological invention had turned attention from God as the creator and redeemer to humankind as the measure of all things. One German theologian epitomised the positive spirit of the day by speaking of the kingdom as the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God. People really started to believe we could all get this human flourishing thing right. The First World War was a huge smack in the face to any such grandiose ideas about human potential. If we had become more sophisticated, it was only in finding more complex ways to kill one another in larger numbers.

As we look back on the Testament of this terrible war, perhaps this is the simplest lesson to learn: that we should be very cautious in talking about human progress and potential. Whenever we say 'in this day and age,' or start arguments with the words 'Here we are in the twenty-first century, and I can't believe that we're still...', we're presupposing a narrative that assumes humanity gets better. When we call someone a dinosaur or say 'Sorry granddad' to a person with youth still on their side, we're suggesting the categories of bad and good map neatly onto the eras of past and future. But

World War One should teach us different. And what happened to Germany in the lead-up to World War Two should settle the debate beyond dispute. Vera Brittain's testimony starts as an account of progress – the emerging voice and power of women whose role had been suppressed for too long. But her life became one of loss, and grief, and horror, and tragedy as a much less upbeat narrative devoured everything before it. And we don't want to remember the First World War because its Testament tells us a whole bunch of things we don't want to face up to about humankind.

The war should also have killed off a bunch of things we shouldn't ever have believed about God. That God is our talisman that ensures we win all the battles we fight. That there's something particularly godly about our nation that makes us on the right side of every battle we enter. That God is leading us gradually from benighted ignorance to glorious enlightenment. To the extent that such convictions exacerbated the slaughter of the First World War is cause for lament. To the extent that such convictions are still with us is cause for repentance. After seeing the horror of carnage that began one hundred years ago, the astonishing thing is not that we still believe in God. It is that God still believes in us. That's the most amazing testament of all.