

A sermon preached on 11th November 2018, the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand.



This is a photo of Armistice Day celebrations outside the Town Hall in the Octagon. We believe the minister on the platform holding his hat up is the then minister of Knox Church, the Reverend Robert Evan Davies. Mr Davies was minister here for 10 years from 1909 to 1919.

Born in Wales, he came here from Petersham, a Sydney suburb. Those ten years were tough for him, a kindly man of sensitivity and scholarship.

During WW1, ministers were responsible for telling families when people had been killed. On about 50 occasions, Mr Davies visited families when a son, a husband, a father, a brother had been killed. It was said at the time that people feared seeing the minister walking up their path.

Imagine the scene

A solemn minister, opening the front gate, knocking on the door, the look of fear and horror on the face of the person opening the door, the sober walk into the kitchen or the lounge. The minister hardly had to say anything.

What did Mr Davies say?

And at the end of the time, what could Mr Davies pray?

The responsibility was so demanding, so unrelenting, it affected Mr Davies' health.

What hope did Mr Davies hold out when so many grieved?

What did he say to the congregation on Sunday when people knew who had been visited the week before? Much said then sounds strange now. Mr Davies was typical of many ministers of the time.

This is a report of what Mr Davies said to parents in 1915:

"... it was a sad thing that their children should die just as they were beginning life; but a few great moments of glorious life were better than living a drab existence to old age. The death of their men in the eyes of the millions of a future generation would, he felt, be considered nothing less than a glorious privilege ..."

Or this emphasising the justness of war ...

“Green Island’s Presbyterian congregation responded with ‘loud applause’ when Robert Davies stated that Britain was fighting for justice and the freedom of all nations.”

Or this by another minister here:

“The Reverend Mr Balfour, at the 1914 Knox Church annual congregational meeting, said soldiers were fighting for the honour of the Empire.”

Or this by the Reverend John Dickie the Principal of the Theological Hall, preaching here towards the end of the war - ‘Clemency to Germany now would be as great a blunder and as great a crime as was Ahab’s treatment of Benhadad. If we do not conquer Germany now a worse fate than that of Belgium and northeast France is in store for the whole British Empire.’”

Knox Church was also a venue for anti-Catholicism, because the Irish Catholics were seen as too ambivalent about the war. Church plaques of the time say “For God, King and Country”. National flags were placed alongside the cross or leaned beside the table.

War was seen as just and holy and godly.

Soldiers died making the ultimate sacrifice.

So one can see how much the armistice meant.

Much was riding on victory. Victory meant vindication. And victory was the victory of God. And what a personal relief it must have been to Mr Davies, and to the people in this congregation.

No more walking up the path. No more being feared when he visited.

We can see why he was there outside the Town Hall holding his hat in the air. Yet as we heard from Jordan two Sundays ago, it was this alignment of empire and church that appalled the young theologians of the time and set a new direction for theology in the twentieth century.

Karl Barth saw the empire of God as wholly other than all human empires. The kingdom of God was qualitatively different, a thoroughly reconfigured realm.

And if the kingdom of God was wholly other, so was God wholly other, the qualitatively different.

Barth and others railed against the alignment of God with any particular human institution, with any particular human cause and certainly with any human empire.

By WW2, many ministers were more circumspect.

The Very Reverend James Gibb, who had been minister at First Church, turned from being the army’s greatest recruiting agent, he said, to being a pacifist. The Reverend DC Herron, later minister of Knox Church, had been chaplain to the Otago Regiment in WW1.

He had seen firsthand the horrors of the war. He was more sympathetic to conscientious objectors and more ambivalent about war than many of his colleagues.

In a letter written early in 1919, Mr Herron looked back on the last funeral he conducted during the war, that of Robert Northam, who was killed in action on 5th November 1918. He described the touching gesture of an older French woman, who planted flowers on the grave, a sign of hope.

Mr Herron recounted a discussion with a soldier in the trenches who felt that "we have slid back into the stone age".

He expressed his desire that the "great gulf between peace and war" should never be crossed again.

For these, God became the victim rather than the victor.

In his recent book *The God Revolution*, the former minister at Coastal Unity, Bruce Hamill, explores this theme. He notes the development of religion as a mechanism for addressing the problem of violence, tied to the idea of scapegoating.

Scapegoating involved blaming or inflicting violence on someone for the problems of the many.

Scapegoating, says Hamill, is a way of controlling violence between human beings, a way of keeping society together.

Blaming and eliminating one person or group produces a common sense of solidarity among others.

The sense of scapegoating relates to the idea of sacrifice, of the one being sacrificed for the many.

And this becomes a way of understanding what happened to Jesus.

But the Jewish tradition proclaimed especially by Isaiah and the Christian understanding that emerges from it, turns the idea of sacrifice on its head.

No longer someone sacrificed from a violently structured world inhabited by warring gods. In Christ, God sacrifices.

And God sacrifices for the sake of humankind, especially those who are despised.

In death on a cross, from the realm of peace, a God of love breaks in on a violent world to turn it upside down.

Glory is embodied not in the sacrifice of a human being but in the sacrifice of God on a Cross, so that the realm of peace breaks in on a warring world.

The God of Glory became the Crucified God.

No more alignments of an Almighty God and a mighty Empire.

The British poet, Malcolm Guite:

November pierces with its bleak remembrance
Of all the bitterness and waste of war.
Our silence tries but fails to make a semblance
Of that lost peace they thought worth fighting for.
Our silence seethes instead with wraiths and whispers,
And all the restless rumour of new wars,
The shells are falling all around our vespers,
No moment is unscarred, there is no pause,
In every instant bloodied innocence
Falls to the weary earth ,and whilst we stand
Quiescence ends again in acquiescence,
And Abel's blood still cries in every land
One silence only might redeem that blood
Only the silence of a dying God.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN
alive to God's Spirit



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