



Remembrance Sunday Sung Requiem The War Poets

13 November 2016

Adrian Poole

Genesis 22: 6–14 Matthew 5: 1–12

Wilfred Owen, The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

I am more and more Christian as I walk the unchristian ways of Christendom... one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace: but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed: but do not kill... Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism.

The words of a 24-year-old soldier, writing to his brother in May 1917, from the hell of the Somme. His name was Wilfred Owen. The following month he was sent home and went for treatment in Edinburgh where he famously met another poet, Siegfried Sassoon. Over the next year Owen wrote a lot of poetry. He returned to France in July 1918 and to the front line at the end of August. On 4 November he was killed, one week before the Armistice.

How do you write about war? It is all too much. Too many lives, too many deaths, too many wounds, too many memories, seared into those who survive. Some great literary works are epic in scale, from Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* to Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and David Jones's *In Parenthesis*. But when we speak of 'The War Poets' now, we normally mean poets who fought in the 'Great War', those who died like Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, and those who survived, more or less damaged, such as Sassoon, Jones, Ivor Gurney and others. We should certainly mean, as anthologists remind us, the host of lesser known names, of women as well as men, for whom making poetry served a great purpose – to *make* something, in the teeth of imminent death and actual pain. To make something of *my* experience, something true and even beautiful – beautiful because true. The poems of the Great War are typically as short and intense as the *Iliad* is seemingly interminable. Why? Throughout history wars have engulfed whole peoples, the civilians as well as the soldiers. Nothing new there. Nor is it new to realise that you cannot see exactly who you are trying to kill and risk being killed by. In the ancient world the archer was an object of suspicion, admiration and envy. Hand-to-hand combat, that's how real men prove their worth. In the killing fields of the Somme it was the sound of the descending shells and the smell of the approaching gas you had to worry about, as Owen and others so vividly recorded. You might never get to see them, the enemy in person.

No wonder that the poets responded by re-personalising the experience of war. And by re-humanising the language of war. A large phrase, 'the language of war', but I mean something quite simple. I mean the myths, fictions and beliefs promoted by those who lead us into war, the kings, presidents, high priests, fathers. They are rarely women, though the mothers and wives and sisters and daughters get roped in to arm the warriors, nurse the wounded, bury the corpses, and serve as sacrificial victims. They can even be asked to lead the charge, like Delacroix's memorable painting of 'Liberty Leading the People' – Marianne, wielding a flag, a rifle and naked breasts. The language of war is characterised by absolute singleness of purpose; by certainty in the justice of our cause, in the difference between friend and foe, in the virtue of loyalty and obedience. On the battle-field words are commands. No room for question, debate, hesitation, ambivalence. 'To be once in doubt is once to be resolved', exclaims Shakespeare's Othello, the celebrated general. You do not want Hamlet in charge of the troops, the Hamlet for whom 'the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'. You want Fortinbras, or even Laertes, or best of all old Hamlet, the father: now there was a real man.

Why is the Genesis tale of Abraham and Isaac such a brilliant piece of story-telling? There are so many things it doesn't tell us. The narrative conjunctions make it all seem so blandly inevitable. 'And, and, so, and, so, when, then, BUT, and, and, and, so.' We are told nothing about Sarah, the wife and mother, not here at least. As for Isaac, we are told that he asks a good question – where is the burnt offering? But we're told nothing about his reaction when his father starts to bind him and gets out the knife. The absence implies total obedience and compliance. We see in the painting by Rembrandt¹ one possible reason why Isaac doesn't say anything. His father has his hand over his face – so that neither he nor we can see the boy's expression let alone hear what he might have to say, or scream. And then there's Abraham, and the total mystery of what goes through his head at this time, if anything, in so far as he's faced with two logically incompatible propositions, God's promise that his seed will inherit the earth and God's command that he must kill his only (legitimate) son.

The tale of Abraham and Isaac has nothing to do with war, but everything to do with obedience and sacrifice, about what you're prepared to risk and for what, or for whom. The Biblical parable is a wonderfully convenient model to *transfer* from the theological level to the military. The night before Agincourt Shakespeare's Henry V prays

O God of battles, steel my soldiers' hearts,
Possess them not with fear! Take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if th'opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them.

'The sense of reckoning': that is what men cannot afford when they go into combat. Steel, that's what flesh and blood, hearts and minds must be turned into. And yet of course, 'the sense of reckoning' is what the experience of war is mostly about – not the relatively brief and lethal moments of active engagement but the ages of waiting beforehand, and during, and after, as everyone concerned, the generals and soldiers and their loved ones, count the cost, or should do.

¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rembrandt_-_Sacrifice_of_Isaac_-_WGA19096.jpg

I have been focusing on a hostility to the idea of sacrifice represented by the Old Testament story in so far as it celebrates a kind of faith that affords no room for doubt, hesitation or ambivalence, let alone protest. I have always been terrified by the story of Abraham and Isaac. I am also scared by Wilfred Owen's poem but I take comfort in its brave protest against the fathers, and the idea of mindless obedience. Owen writes for the Isaacs who speak out and speak back.

Yet of course the Bible plays many roles in the Great War including, so the legends go, literally stopping bullets. For Wilfred Owen as for others there was, he said, 'no unremembering the scriptures which had been [his] daily reading for the best part of two decades'. Above all, there was the very different image of sacrifice at the heart of the New Testament. As early as 1915 there appeared the poetry anthology, *The Fiery Cross*, and the image of the soldier as a suffering Christ remained powerful and pervasive. Nor did all the poets who survived lose their faith in the trenches; some found their faith later, like Sassoon and David Jones.

All sorts of parallels may be drawn between the Old Testament and the New, but where the idea of sacrifice is concerned it's hard not to be struck by the difference. Abraham has no *idea* why he is sacrificing his son, nor does Isaac; it's a matter of blind, even 'animal' obedience – rewarded, it's true, by the distinction God goes on to mark between human and beast. But if the son of the Old Testament has no idea and nothing to say, then the son of the New Testament has plenty of both, including that wonderful passage from the Sermon on the Mount, known as the Beatitudes, to which we have just listened, and the Lord's prayer to which we will come, but including also his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want', and his cry of agony on the Cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Wilfred Owen found it hard to reconcile pure Christianity with pure patriotism. We can see what he means. In a supposedly advanced state of civilization it seems easier to say what we are prepared to die for than what we are prepared to kill for. A hundred years on, as we steel ourselves for the next four years, or more, we may recall the speech with which in 1917 the American President sought the authority of Congress for entering the Great War. 'It is a fearful thing', said Woodrow Wilson, 'to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance.' The President went on to speak of fighting 'for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy, ... for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free'.

These are ringing words, sobering, uplifting, challenging: 'the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts': what *are* they? That was then and this is now. Blessed are the peacemakers. God help us all.