

Remembrance Day 2015

Grave Talk: 'Hell'

'Hell rages around us. It's unimaginable.' So wrote a young German army chaplain from the trenches of the First World War to his father, a Lutheran pastor. Perhaps we can't imagine it but we've been given something of a sense of it from the writings of the war poets of the 1914-18 war and by the film-makers following the Second World War. *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* paid tribute to the heroism of those who liberated Europe after D-Day going through such Hell-ish scenes in order to do so. Who could forget the opening 27 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* as the American soldiers land on Omaha beach and face the unremitting onslaught of German machine guns and artillery. 'Hell rages around us. It's unimaginable.'

Those we remember today experienced something of Hell, the furious and bloody reign of death and destruction, the unbearable barrage of noise – of artillery and dynamite, of human screaming and cursing, the wastelands of ruined towns, scorched earth and collapsed civilisation. They touched hell and indeed participated in it, from the earlier hands-on bayonetting of a brother human being to the later dropping of a technological marvel that would kill or cause unspeakable suffering to hundreds of thousands. Those who come back from war do not just harbour pride in their hearts; many also conceal deep guilt and shame at what they have experienced and caused.

But returning soldiers speak not just of the Hell they have seen but also witness to a taste of Heaven they perhaps will never experience again, not least in the companionship and brotherhood they sensed – enjoyed – in the midst of all the carnage. *Band of Brothers* was a 2001 American mini-series depicting the landing of Easy Company, part of a parachute regiment, in Europe and their military engagements until the end of the war. The title of the series is of course taken from the famous speech of Shakespeare's Henry V at the Battle of Agincourt whose 600th anniversary we commemorated just two weeks ago. It was St Crispin's Day, 25 October 1415. Thanks in part to the superior range of the new English technology, the long bow, the outnumbered English troops won a famous victory against their French foes.

*This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say "To-morrow is Saint Crispian."
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words—
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester—
Be in their flowing cups freshly rememb'ed.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered-*

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.*

Those noble words, put in to the mouth of a 15th century English king, were performed by Laurence Olivier on BBC radio in the closing years of the Second World War. They fortified the spirits of many, including Winston Churchill who asked Olivier to turn the play into a film that is still celebrated.

For us though it is hard to reconcile the nobility and piety of Henry's speech with the bloody brutality of the battle that ensued. Thousands of the French were simply hacked to death in the mud; the captured were ordered to be killed. It was slaughter. Hell inflicted on fellow humans by those who were supposed to be noble and pious, Christian and virtuous. Again this strange amalgam of Heaven and Hell.

'Hell rages around us. It's unimaginable.' the young German chaplain wrote. I suppose we cannot really imagine Hell and neither can we really imagine Heaven, but our imaginations are all we have to go with - and that's true of the Bible too. The Bible speaks of Heaven and Hell but the language is earthly and imaginative. The word for Hell in the New Testament is Gehenna, which was actually a place - the worst, most horrible place that the ancient Jewish imagination could conceive of. It is the valley of Hinnom, where centuries before the followers of Baal and Moloch cults sacrificed their children through fire. It was a place seen as accursed. In Roman times it became the rubbish dump of the city where there were perpetual fires and the dead bodies of criminals and animals were thrown. It was a ghastly and godforsaken place.

And it is the faith of the Bible that these experiences we speak of as Heaven and Hell on earth are pointers to eternal realities. Ultimately there is a Heaven and ultimately there is a Hell.

Gehenna may give us the image of unquenchable, everlasting fire, but I think we need to look elsewhere in the New Testament for an understanding of Hell that goes deeper for us, but I want to get there via another war film, Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient*. The film is the story of a love affair between Laszlo, a Hungarian mapmaker, and Katharine Clifton, an English woman. The affair ends with her critically wounded in the Sahara desert. Laszlo is faced with the choice of either staying with her while she dies or recovers, or fetching medical help. He leaves her in a cave with a few days' food, water and a torch and goes for help. When he arrives at a British-held town three days later he is arrested as a spy and it is days before he is able to escape, borrow a plane and fly back to his lover. She of course has died, on her own, in the dark with battery, food and water all run out. As he flies her dead body away he is shot down and seriously injured. He is rescued and cared for by Bedouin and then by a French-Canadian nurse who devotes weeks to his care in an abandoned monastery in Northern Italy. He has lost his memory but her kindness, friendship and compassion both perhaps help to rekindle his memory but also ensure that as he relives those awful hellish experiences he is not on his own. He is dying and in the end asks her to administer an overdose of morphine. Her care ensures that he does not die alone but in some way reconciled and at peace – and at the same time his friendship rekindles her hope (she has had some harrowing experiences of losing those she loves).

The contrast in the film is between the way Katharine dies, on her own, isolated, forsaken – and the way Laszlo dies, loved, cared for, accompanied. The message seems to be a challenge to what we think really matters. Is it preserving life at all costs, that led Laszlo to abandon his lover to die a long lingering death on her own, or is the real threat to us not our mortality but isolation, being cut off from companionship and human love? This is a huge question for our society today when we pursue relentlessly – and not necessarily wrongly – the war against mortality by keeping people alive at all costs and pouring vast resources into medical research, when at the same time vast numbers of people, often elderly, vulnerable people, feel on their own, isolated and craving human company.

But back to the Bible. The place of crucifixion, like Gehenna, was outside the city wall. Golgotha was a place of Hell for our Lord not primarily because of the human suffering, though that was immense, but because his 'Band of Brothers' had deserted him – denied him, betrayed him, fled. The sisters didn't, of course, but that's another story. And then there is the cry from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' More poignant than a statement, it's a question – why have you forsaken me? To be forsaken ultimately by God – that is Hell. Jesus died and experienced that godforsakenness so that we might live and never lose our sense of the company of God and of others. I do not know for how many, if any, their ultimate destiny is Hell – but I do believe it's a reality, even if perhaps, mercifully, as in our second reading, it is a second death, eternal in consequence rather than duration.

'Hell rages around us' wrote the young pastor. His name was Paul Tillich. He became one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. His experience of war changed him completely. He lived with long bouts of depression – which he called in his later writings the abyss - but at the same time testified to the glimpses of Heaven given through - even because - of the experience of Hell. 'True experience', he wrote from the front line, 'has its roots in suffering and happiness is a blossom which opens itself up only now and then.'

Tillich, like many, entered the war full of patriotism and aflame with the liberal optimism and belief in progress and human potential. He came out with that faith in human nature and civilisation shattered. In the years that followed he was one of the few that could see the Third Reich for what it was. He was barred from German universities in 1933, the first non-Jewish academic, as he put it, 'to be so honoured.' He emigrated to the United States where he was perhaps the last major theologian who also commanded the heights and respect of the world of philosophy and of the cultural world in general.

But his voice is now silent and our culture no longer listens to theologians. People no longer believe in Hell but they still experience it and its pull leads to record numbers of suicides, suicide bombers and people who in the name of religion delight in blowing men, women and children out of the sky.

*From all that terror teaches,
from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches
that comfort cruel men,
from sale and profanation
of honour and the sword,
from sleep and from damnation,
deliver us, good Lord!*