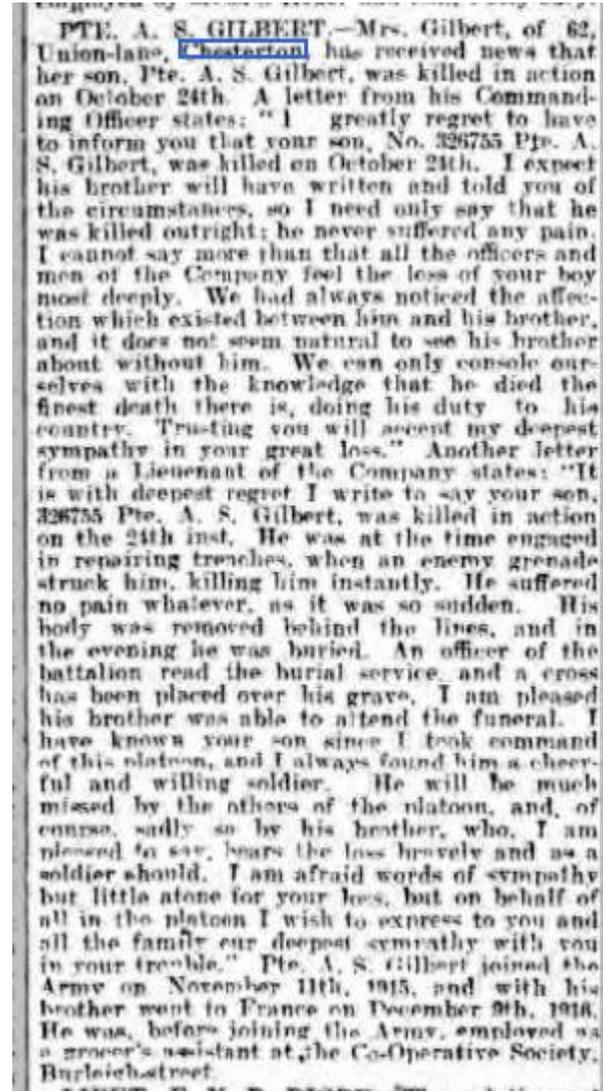


## Remembrance Day 2017

*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.*

It was the Great War that set the date for our Remembrance Day – or at least the nearest Sunday to it. The war that was meant to end all wars claimed the lives of ¾ million British soldiers, twice as many as in the Second World war, 30-40 times the previous record number of casualties (the Crimean War).

There are 92 names of Chesterton men from the first war on our war memorial; that's more households than represented here who received a letter from a commanding office or equivalent that ran something like this one (received 100 years ago almost to the day):



PTE. A. S. GILBERT.—Mrs. Gilbert, of 62, Union-lane, **Chesterton**, has received news that her son, Pte. A. S. Gilbert, was killed in action on October 24th. A letter from his Commanding Officer states: "I greatly regret to have to inform you that your son, No. 326755 Pte. A. S. Gilbert, was killed on October 24th. I expect his brother will have written and told you of the circumstances, so I need only say that he was killed outright; he never suffered any pain. I cannot say more than that all the officers and men of the Company feel the loss of your boy most deeply. We had always noticed the affection which existed between him and his brother, and it does not seem natural to see his brother about without him. We can only console ourselves with the knowledge that he died the finest death there is, doing his duty to his country. Trusting you will accept my deepest sympathy in your great loss." Another letter from a Lieutenant of the Company states: "It is with deepest regret I write to say your son, 326755 Pte. A. S. Gilbert, was killed in action on the 24th inst. He was at the time engaged in repairing trenches, when an enemy grenade struck him, killing him instantly. He suffered no pain whatever, as it was so sudden. His body was removed behind the lines, and in the evening he was buried. An officer of the battalion read the burial service, and a cross has been placed over his grave. I am pleased his brother was able to attend the funeral. I have known your son since I took command of this platoon, and I always found him a cheerful and willing soldier. He will be much missed by the others of the platoon, and, of course, sadly so by his brother, who, I am pleased to say, bears the loss bravely and as a soldier should. I am afraid words of sympathy but little atone for your loss, but on behalf of all in the platoon I wish to express to you and all the family our deepest sympathy with you in your trouble." Pte. A. S. Gilbert joined the Army on November 11th, 1915, and with his brother went to France on December 29th, 1916. He was, before joining the Army, employed as a grocer's assistant at the Co-Operative Society, Burleigh-street.

Arthur Gilbert had joined up on 11 November 1915 and with his brother George went to France a year later. Before the war he was a grocer's assistant at the Co-op in Burleigh Street; he was engaged to be married to Agnes Cutting. The family lived in Union Lane (62) and were faithful members of the Baptist Chapel which was then round the corner from us in Chapel

Street and is now the SNAP Nursery. George survived the war and married his late brother's fiancée. He became a life deacon at what became Arbury Chapel and died in 1964.

1 of 92; 92 of ¼ million. The shell-shock experienced literally by many on the front-line was experienced emotionally by the bereaved back home – mothers, fathers, fiancées, lovers, best friends. It was a time when many turned to spiritualism in the hope of contact with their loved ones, perhaps not least to know they were OK, at peace. Photography came into its own in WW1. People could see the conditions on the front line– albeit heavily censored and controlled. Arthur Gilbert died at Passchendaele, which was a sea of mud. The letter from his lieutenant says that he was buried there and a cross placed over his grave, but it was never found again. The records say 'no known grave' and he is commemorated on the memorial at Arras alongside 10s of thousands of others. The Gilbert family were people of strong faith and no doubt upright lives, but what of the thousands who died who were less observant in faith and whose moral living may not have been so pristine? In Church of England churches there was a huge surge and pressure, and perhaps pastoral need, to pray for the departed – that they would be at peace and spared from further bitter pains. Surely a merciful God could not consign those who had experienced hell on earth to an even greater hell in the life to come? This surge of pastoral need combined with the momentum of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Oxford movement that sought to reinvigorate the Church of England in its continuity with the pre-Reformation church, its rituals and, to some extent its doctrines. In 1927/28 there was a proposed revision of the Prayer Book that included explicit prayer for the

dead for the first time since the Reformation. Supported by the bishops and clergy in convocation it was only defeated by a lay Protestant reaction in the House of Commons.

Here at St Andrew's strangely it was at the same sort of time that the layers of whitewash had been wearing away to reveal the scene of the final judgement that adorned our church before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. You don't have to take it literally to feel the power of its message and its impact upon our forebears. Over at this side would have been the jaws of Hell – literally, in the form of a big fish or dragon. The demons, the forces of evil are seeking to drag those rising from the grave to their bitter destiny. On the other side are the pavilions of Paradise, the hope of the blessed. Beautiful angels are helping the departed from their graves as they stumble a little, are a little dazed and look beseechingly at St Peter to open the gates and allow them to enter the celestial city.

I have the sense that the Thessalonian Christians were feeling, albeit this side of the grave, a little like those vulnerable, naked figures. They had heard and responded to a message that promised eternal life, that Jesus Christ was the end and goal of history and had come to wrap it all up and to sort out the world's injustices. They had put their lives on the line, perhaps given up their livelihoods, had taken the risk of being identified as followers of Jesus in the face of opposition from families, friends and the powers-that-be. They had staked all for this cause, this message; and some of their fellow Christians had died, some perhaps because they were Christians. They had fought the good fight but where was the victory? The one they followed seemed to suggest he and they would rule the world in some way, but they were just a small

obscure sect battling their way in the marketplace of religions and ideas in the first century Roman Empire. Like these poor naked souls they were naked and vulnerable. In this letter here they are gathered around St Paul looking for hope, not actually primarily for themselves but for those who had died.

*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.*

I don't think St Paul was insulated from raw grief. I don't think in the words of our reading he is being disparaging of it. I think he has seen and felt it and wants to protect his Christian friends and children from it. What he does is paint them a picture in words. It's not quite the same imagery as this [Doom] but, similarly, it's full of very literal things that we probably don't need to take literally – trumpets and clouds, not jaws and pavilions. He is very adamant about the order of things.

*We who are alive... will by no means precede those who have died... the dead in Christ will rise first.*

It seems the Thessalonians were actually rather English. They were worried about the queue and not being seen to be jumping it. Or, to put it another way, they wanted to allow those who had already died to go through the door first. They would not have felt right having one second of heavenly bliss ahead of their loved ones who had suffered and died and should be given the honour and precedence. If you don't quite get the cosmology, get the sense of solidarity with and concern for the departed. They are not forgotten; far from it they are remembered first of all.

In a similar way the mothers and fathers, wives and lovers, a hundred years ago wanted to keep faith with their loved ones who had died, both those whose faith in Christ was clear and bright and those with sins to confess and whose peace with God was not always evident. Were they just to be forgotten forever?

The nation committed itself to remembering; we still do. Here we are. We who are Christians, though, do not remember or grieve as those who have no hope.

What is missing in this scene is the one thing – the only thing – that can make any sense of it all. We cannot see it but we can see where it was, the shape of the cross around which this scene was painted. The church where I was curate, St Andrew's Enfield, had no traces left of their doom painting, but they repainted their whitewashed chancel arch as a memorial to the fallen of the first world war. Dominating it, at the heart of it, at the apex of the arch is the massive figure of Christ on the cross in all his loveliness and all its awfulness. Our faith is that in him God has entered into the very depths of the evil and suffering humans are capable of inflicting on others and making that the place of forgiveness and reconciliation. I have no other hope; I believe there is no other hope.

I use this chancel arch to teach some of our future ministers about church history, for here it is in all its glories and all its violent excesses. Here is a medieval Catholic vision that was spoilt by its abuse of its role of mediating God to people and people to God; on top of it in places is the Protestant word which at its best has liberated the individual but at its worst has elevated argument above lovingkindness and certitude above faithfulness. We have

given thanks, rightly and sincerely, in these past weeks for the Reforming legacy of Martin Luther, but we have noted in passing a dark side to that to, not least for example his blatant and shocking anti-Semitism that seemed to develop in his later thinking. There may be not be a straight line from that to the Holocaust but there is certainly a dotted one.

Modern sensibility is suspicious of ideologies – of big pictures and grand visions. It has seen how destructive they can be and have been in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Everybody loves this doom but I suspect that if they saw it as it was originally, with all its colour and clarity, they would find it too much, too bold, too assertive, too dominating.

Whether it's the religious conflicts of the 16<sup>th</sup> century or the national conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> it is vital that we neither whitewash it nor over-restore it; we must remember but we must also embrace new visions and possibilities. To live in the past is to have no ambition or vitality; to be forgetful of the past is to have no history and maturity. The biblical vision is always one of striding onwards to the land of promise, but always remembering where we have come from.