

CORPL. P. G. BIGGS.—Mr. G. Biggs, of "Hazle-
ere," Aylestone-road, has just received news that
son, Corpl. Percy G. Biggs, has been killed in
tion. The officer Commanding his regiment
rites: "It is my very painful duty to have to
inform you that your son, Corpl. G. Biggs, was
killed in the successful operations recently carried
out by his battalion. Will you please accept the
sympathy of all his company at your great loss,
which is very keenly felt. Your son was an effi-
cient N.C.O., a fine soldier, and had won the respect
of his officers and the affection of his comrades.
He was always keen on parade, and cheerful under
all conditions of hardship and discomfort. It may
alleviate your sorrow somewhat to know that your
son died immediately, and suffered no pain, being
hit by a shell." Corpl. Biggs, who was 23 years of
age, joined the Regular Army (Essex) at the age of
16. In the present war he was with one of the
heavy drafts to the Dardanelles, where he was first
wounded. He returned to England for a short
leave in May last, and then proceeded to France.
He had only returned from leave to the front just
over a fortnight when he was killed.

One of the 92 names listed on our war memorial, sons of Chesterton who lost their lives during the Great War of 1914-1918. One name, one story, one loss, one cause of heartache and shedding of tears – replayed scores of times in our parish, hundreds of times across Cambridge, 100s of thousands of times across the nation. Our church bells like those across the country were largely silenced during the war. We ring the bells every Remembrance Day half-muffled, a mournful tone to mark all those tears, all that suffering, all that loss. Our nation then and now bides by the exhortation of John Donne:

*...send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.*

We all feel it; we are all part of it. No man is an island; we are all diminished. We cannot suffer as they suffered but we can honour them. We can stand and keep silence; we can even shed a tear. Why not? A few drops to join the oceans that have flooded from dimmed eyes and broken hearts.

Percy Biggs's father, George, worked for a bookseller. His home in Aylestone Road was then a humble one. Percy's mother, Emma, died the year before he did. His brother, Sidney, had had an adventurous life. He is described as having a dark complexion and brown eyes. He had gone to sea at the age of 17 as a servant on the naval ships, HMS Victory and HMS Albion. He then emigrated to Canada where he married and had a child. He enlisted for military service at St Catharine's Ontario and served in France along the Western Front for three years. On 28 August he went over the top in a military operation in Boiry. An enemy shell exploded nearby severely injuring his back. At the casualty clearing station he died of his wounds that same day.

A wife and two sons lost within three years. The eldest son nearly made it to the end, but not quite. So too for Captain Alec Johnson, commemorated in the south aisle, who died on 18 September 1918

leading his company into the Battle of Epehy. We warmly welcome this morning Alec's nephew, Peter Johnson.

At this eastern end of the south wall is a brass plaque that commemorates all those connected with this church who died in the Great War – all of those names are, of course, repeated on the civic war memorial outside where those of other churches and no church are remembered. Above this inside memorial is one to John Lambert who was the Postmaster of Cambridge and for twenty years Churchwarden and Sidesman here at St Andrew's. He died in 1916 but beneath is an inscription to his son, Stamford Leigh Lambert who was killed in action at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli, on August 25 1915, the year before his father died. He didn't bear arms but served in the medical corps, 1st East Anglian Field Ambulance. One of his officers wrote, "He was a brave, fearless fellow, one of the best boys we had in my section."

This is Harold Mansfield who was brought up at 16 Union Lane. He fought at Passchendaele. It wasn't the guns that did for him but the mud: he got stuck in a mud-filled shell-hole and couldn't get out. He was taken captive but the Germans didn't have much food; he suffered malnutrition and effectively starved to death on 25 July 1917.

And finally – because I can't do everyone – this is Leslie Barker of 213 Chesterton Road who had gained his wings with the Royal Flying Corps in 1916 flying a Maurice Farman biplane. In 1918 the corps became the Royal Air Force whose centenary has been celebrated this year. 100 years ago today Leslie Barker was still alive. He was killed flying in Germany six months later, in May 1919.

Even though a hundred years today in about half an hour the guns fell silent, it wasn't over. The suffering continued albeit much reduced and the aftershocks of those catastrophic years continued throughout the twentieth century. But on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month there was a huge national sigh of relief that turned into an explosion of joy. Our bells rang out again, not half-muffled but full-throated as they will sound at 12.30pm today. National grief was put aside for a moment and the bells summoned the nation into its churches for some hastily organised services of thanksgiving. Cambridge had its civic celebration on the day after, Tuesday 12th. Great St Mary's played host to a vast throng of the great and the good and ordinary townfolk. The service was at noon but it was clear well before then that there was no way everyone who was gathering could fit into the church so they hastily laid on a second service in the Guildhall and then a third one in St Michael's, also full to overflowing. My predecessor, the Reverend Noel Marsh, conducted the service and the reading – as it was in Great St Mary's – was the portion of Isaiah 40 that we have heard this morning.

St Andrew's regulars will know that we have been following a series of sermons on the book of Isaiah since September. It would be fair to say that Isaiah's tone to his people is not always affirmative.

*Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the Lord,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged.*

He despairs of the people and their waywardness, their neglect of the widow and the orphan, their corruption and injustice, their hypocritical religious practices. He despairs of them, but he does not despair of God and he holds out a vision of a better future when 'swords will be beaten into ploughshares' and 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation'. But his message to his contemporaries, to his people, was grim, but now times have moved on, the people have suffered

years of war, destruction and hardship. They have been battered and bruised, they have endured unimaginable losses. Their pride has been shot to pieces and the prophet hears a call to proclaim a new message:

*1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

The prophet hears a voice. 'Cry out!' it says. 'What shall I cry?' he replies. What is my message to be?

'All people' says the voice, 'are grass'. 'The grass withers, the flower fades.. surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever.'

People don't last – even the great ones (in his day, Sennacherib, king of Assyria). Even greater were to follow: Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Alexander the Great of Greece, Julius Caesar of Rome. They ruled empires, but they have been and gone. Isaiah has been and gone; we actually know precious little about him but what we do remember and still read and quote today are his words – some excoriating, some bursting with hope, some extraordinarily prescient, some - that we hear every year at carol services - uncannily pointing the way to the coming of Jesus Christ. In my bible are 62 pages of his words that are still able to inspire three months of sermons and reflections because they are not just Isaiah's words, they are inspired words, holy words, divine words, lasting words.

*The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

That word was much treasured in the trenches, the battleships and the new aeroplanes. The Bible Society alone produced nine million copies of the bible that were distributed to allied soldiers. Many kept a copy on their person, for some because they treasured the words; others perhaps semi-superstitiously as a kind of charm. There are a number of stories of how lives were saved when bullets or shrapnel were lodged in the pages of the bible. One man wrote home to say that when he opened his bible the bullet had stopped, you've guessed it, in the book of Isaiah – chapter 49 verse 8, and he said it caught his eye as soon as he saw it: 'I will preserve thee'. Those words had been uttered in one context 2,500 years before. They were remembered, treasured, written down, copied, read, taught, handed on so that they found new meanings in new contexts and have continued to inspire, challenge, encourage, exhort and instruct fresh generations of readers and interpreters.

*The grass withers, the flower fades:
but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

The first part isn't that comforting, I guess. All people are grass – that's us; we don't last, we are soon gone. We know that; war above all teaches us that. The comfort is that what really matters does endure – and that stretches to the point that we really matter to God, those we have loved and lost really matter to God. Those tender words that conclude the reading from Isaiah remind us of that:

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,*

*and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

There is comfort here; there is comfort for a Jerusalem that had suffered enough. The prophet is now impelled to speak tenderly to her, to comfort her. The time of lacerating prophetic words was over; the time for encouraging and rebuilding had begun. I suspect that's why my predecessor read this text to the people of Cambridge 100 years ago tomorrow. The people had suffered enough; now was not a time to ring half-muffled bells or preach half-muffled sermons. Now was the time to ring in the new, to speak tenderly and to hear ancient inspired, holy words afresh that would bring comfort and a sense of what will stand, what lasts, for ever.