

Woodbine Willie

The onset of the First World War posed an awkward set of questions for the Church. Where on earth was God when it was declared ? Does He support one side more than the other ? In what circumstances can the sixth commandment – that one about not killing – be set aside ? And, most crucial of all, what consolation can religion offer a soldier, when he sees his pals cut down in their thousands ?

One Army chaplain provided his men with the best comfort he could find. He gave them a packet of fags.

That padre did much good work either side of the war too, and won the Military Cross to boot. But it was what he did with his cigarettes that gave him the nickname that has stuck with him, and it was a name he cheerfully embraced. They called him "Woodbine Willie".

An exhibition currently running in the Dean's Chapel at Worcester Cathedral appropriately tells us Willie's story, for Worcester was his adopted home, and the city where he is buried.

Let's at least give the man his real name to begin with. Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy was born in Leeds on June 27 1883 of Irish descent. Both Geoffrey's father and grandfather had been Anglican priests, so a career in the Church was hardly surprising, though he toyed with a career in teaching before taking holy orders. In the Summer of 1908, Kennedy was ordained at Worcester Cathedral, and handed a curacy in Rugby, at that time part of the diocese of Worcester.

While many aspects of the Church of England seemed remote from the lives of the urban poor, Studdert Kennedy's approach could hardly have been more different. It was with the poor he was most at ease, with a missionary zeal to enter into and improve their lives. It's told that Kennedy's housekeeper was obliged to keep the curate's salary herself to prevent him giving it all away.

When, in 1914, Kennedy was offered a parish of his own, he chose the poorest on the list, the parish of St Paul's in Worcester, an inner city area of deprivation and urban poverty.

1914 turned out to be the key year in Studdert Kennedy's life. Not only did he marry in this year, and find a parish, it was also the year that war came both to him and to all.

Whatever feelings Kennedy was later to hold about war, there was no doubting the patriotism with which he waved the men of Worcester off to the Front. "I believe," he wrote in the parish magazine, "every able man ought to volunteer for service anywhere. There ought be no shirking of that duty."

But the priest from Worcester went one step further. In 1915 he signed up himself, and in December 1915 was sent to France as an Army chaplain.

And now Studdert Kennedy began to see what that "duty" consisted off, a constant round of commiseration and encouragement, countless services before battle, and even more committals after.

Kennedy's posting was to Rouen, where the trains pulled in on their way to the Front. Here he set up his mission, and armed with two large knapsacks, handed out cigarettes and New Testaments to the troops as they passed by.

At a time when the gap between privates and officers was growing, and the futility of the conflict beginning to dawn, Woodbine Willie did a remarkable job of bridging

the divide. He preached the language of the common soldier, swore (and smoked) like a trooper, wrote letters home on their behalf, and generally convinced those in the trenches that he was one of them, not one of the others.

That empathy suffused Kennedy's poetry too, which flooded out as a moving commentary on the war, much of it composed in Worcester dialect.

What's the use of a cross to 'im ?

'E weren't a religious man,

'E said no prayers and 'e sang no 'ymns —

I'll make this do if I can.

It's all full o' notches — an awkward piece,

But I'll see what a knife'll do.

I allus were one to respec' the dead,

And 'e were a good pal too.

Once the war was over, Studdert Kennedy returned to Worcester, his missionary fervour undiminished. But Woodbine Willie's reputation now went before him. He received the Military Cross "for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty" at Messines Ridge, though Kennedy's own version of the citation is far more immediate.

For the bullets rattled round me,

But I couldn't leave them there,

Water-soaked in flooded shell-holes,

Reft of common Christian prayer.

Kennedy remained in charge of St Paul's parish until 1921, and continued to live in Worcester for the rest of his life. But Woodbine Willie was now a national treasure too, writing books, preaching up and down the country, and undertaking missionary tours abroad.

When he was offered the post of chaplain to George V, it was meant to make life easier for him, but it never did. The experience of war only served to make his message of social inequality – what we might call Christian socialism - even more intense.

By the end of the turbulent 1920s Studdert Kennedy had worn himself out, and he died in 1929 at the comparatively young age of 46. The cigarettes probably didn't help either.

Yet Woodbine Willie would not have had it any other way. Indeed, he had already penned his own epitaph, and his own explanation.

And boys I'd sooner fizzle up

I' the flames of burning 'ell,

Than stand and look into 'Is face,

And 'ear 'Is voice say "Well ?"