

# The Pity of War

## A Pilgrimage

Based on the life and poetry of Wilfred Owen

Special edition to mark the centenary of Wilfred Owen's  
25<sup>th</sup> and last birthday which he spent in Ripon Cathedral

## **This pilgrimage is one of a series based in or around Ripon Cathedral**

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## The Pity of War

This simple meditation leads us around the Cathedral that Wilfred Owen knew well; pausing to understand more of his life, his poetry and his times. There will be opportunities to pray and to think about some of the challenging issues Owen raises for us.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) is widely recognised as one of the outstanding voices of the First World War. He saw his vital role as one of speaking for the men in his care and to show the Pity of War.

Owen's poetry with its compassion and indignation, its unashamed realism and lyrical tone speaks to us today as vigorously as when he wrote it.

He spent the most productive and creative period of his short life in Ripon in 1918 and poignantly spent his last birthday afternoon sitting quietly in Ripon Cathedral.

The Pity of War is a sombre subject with which to engage but we are here in this ancient cathedral church to pray to the God who in the crucifixion and resurrection of his Son assured us that despite the shortcomings of humanity, God's kingdom of justice and peace will one day be seen the whole world over.

*We begin at the Font on the south side of the Nave*

## **At the Font**

The Font is the place of birth into the Church through baptism

The first letter of St Peter tells us:

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner',

*1 Peter 2:1-4, 7-8*

## Childhood

Wilfred Owen was born in Oswestry, Shropshire, on 18th March 1893, into a prosperous merchant family who, soon after his birth, suffered a severe change in their fortunes. His father, Tom, was a railway clerk serving in Oswestry and then in Birkenhead and Shrewsbury, where Wilfred was educated. Through his mother, Susan, he was brought up in a strongly evangelical Christian environment, attending Sunday school and several church services each Sunday. He and his mother were inspired initially by the example of Canon W H F Robson in Birkenhead, who was firmly committed to the Ministry of the Word and preached to congregations of a thousand or more each Sunday. Owen thoroughly studied the Bible aided by his daily use of Scripture Union notes.

Wilfred Owen seems to have had a normal and apparently contented childhood: playing games, taking seaside holidays and going on country walks. His affection for nature began to develop in the gentle

Shropshire and Cheshire countryside close to his homes. He is often pictured dressed as a boy soldier, unconsciously pointing to the bitter sentiments captured in his later poem 'Arms and the Boy'.

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade  
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;  
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;  
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,  
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,  
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth  
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.  
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;  
And God will grow no talons at his heels,  
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

*'Arms and the Boy', Wilfred Owen  
Written in Ripon in 1918*

A Prayer to guide us in our lives

God our Creator,  
we fail to seek your justice,  
and swerve from the way of your righteousness:  
look with compassion upon those facing danger, disaster, and  
devastation.  
Guide us all along the path of life, and make us valiant for  
truth,  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

*We next move to the Chapel of the Holy Spirit in the South Quire Aisle*

## At the Chapel of the Holy Spirit

At this Chapel we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit.

According to St John ‘...the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father will testify on our behalf...’. *John 15, 26*

### Adolescence and young Adulthood

Owen became a pupil teacher in Shrewsbury but wanted to go to university. The family could not afford to pay for his studies so he took a job as Parish Assistant to the Rector, Herbert Wigan, of the parish of Dunsden, near Reading. Here he taught the Sunday school, carried out pastoral visits and ran a youth group while studying for London University entrance. He became increasingly confident in his ability to write poetry.

He began to have doubts about his faith and through his reading of ‘modern’ poets like John Masefield, Rupert Brooke and particularly Harold Monroe he began to be attracted to a vision of the world where individuals were responsible for their own destiny without notions of a supernatural God. The doubts posed by young members of his Bible class added to his concerns about the Churches’ response to the plight of the underprivileged and resulted in early 1913 in his suffering a severe spiritual crisis feeling unable to accept the certainties of his upbringing.

He left Dunsden and in a dramatic change of direction sought his fortune as teacher of English in France, initially at a Berlitz School in Bordeaux, but later as private tutor to several wealthy families. Here he was introduced to the poet Laurent Tailhade whose thinking on the need to retreat into the imagination influenced him for a time.

However Owen soon had another decision to take as war had broken out...

Owen's spiritual crisis is eloquently captured in the poem 'The Unreturning' with its references to being '...gagged by a smothering wing...' and the '...chained...' doors of heaven.

Suddenly night crushed out the day and hurled  
Her remnants over cloud-peaks, thunder-walled.  
Then fell a stillness such as harks appalled  
When far-gone dead return upon the world.

There watched I for the Dead; but no ghost woke.  
Each one whom Life exiled I named and called.  
But they were all too far, or dumbled, or thralled,  
And never one fared back to me or spoke.

Then peered the indefinite unshapen dawn  
With vacant gloaming, sad as half-lit minds,  
The weak-limned hour when sick men's sighs are drained.  
And while I wondered on their being withdrawn,  
Gagged by the smothering Wing which none unbinds,  
I dreaded even a heaven with doors so chained.

*'The Unreturning', Wilfred Owen  
Written late 1912-1918  
finished at Craigloughart / Scarborough*

Many of us are assailed by doubts and uncertainties from time to time. This prayer by Thomas Merton might help us in such circumstances.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain  
where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am  
following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please  
you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road  
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost  
and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never  
leave me to face my perils alone.

*From 'Thoughts in Solitude', written in 1958  
by Thomas Merton (1915- 1968)*

*We now turn to the left and sit in front of the High Altar*

## **At the High Altar**

Behind the High Altar we see Ripon's War Memorial, a monument to the men (and one woman) from Ripon who lost their lives in the First World War. The gilded reredos (screen) behind the High Altar by Sir Ninian Comper completed in 1922 provides further commemoration and is noteworthy for its youthful central figure of Christ portrayed at the same age as many of those who died.

Let us reflect for a short time on those who died and the impact on their families and friends knowing that God was with them as he is with us all.

Words from St Paul's second letter to Timothy help us:

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

*2 Timothy 4:6-8*

## Active Service

Like the young people of Ripon, Wilfred Owen also joined up, initially into the Artists Rifles, where he trained in London and Essex, occasionally attending services at Westminster Abbey and becoming familiar with London and the developing artistic scene there.

He was commissioned into the 5th Manchester Regiment in June 1916 and began a period of preparation for active service in France, for which he departed at the end of 1916. He survived his first harrowing action on the Serre and at St Quentin but long periods under fire and a concussion caused by a fall into a disused village house cellar began to take their toll on Owen's mental health. The final straw was being blown into the air by a shell at Savy Wood and then lying outside for several days next to the dismembered body of one of his brother officers. During a rest period at the rear it became clear that he could not continue to serve and he was eventually sent to Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh to recover from the shell-shock.

Owen captured the sense of being under fire at Savy Wood in his poem 'Spring Offensive' contrasting the quiet before battle with the chaos of the attack.

Halted against the shade of a last hill,  
They fed, and, lying easy, were at ease  
And, finding comfortable chests and knees  
Carelessly slept.  
But many there stood still  
To face the stark, blank sky beyond the ridge,  
Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.  
Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled  
By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,  
For though the summer oozed into their veins  
Like the injected drug for their bones' pains,  
Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,  
Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.

Hour after hour they ponder the warm field—  
And the far valley behind, where the buttercups  
Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,  
Where even the little brambles would not yield,  
But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;  
They breathe like trees unstirred.  
Till like a cold gust thrilled the little word  
At which each body and its soul begird  
And tighten them for battle. No alarms  
Of bugles, no high flags, no clamorous haste—  
Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced  
The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done.  
O larger shone that smile against the sun,—  
Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned.  
So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together  
Over an open stretch of herb and heather  
Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned  
With fury against them; and soft sudden cups  
Opened in thousands for their blood; and the green slopes  
Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.

Of them who running on that last high place  
Leapt to swift unseen bullets, or went up  
On the hot blast and fury of hell's upsurge,  
Or plunged and fell away past this world's verge,  
Some say God caught them even before they fell.  
But what say such as from existence' brink  
Ventured but drave too swift to sink.  
The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,  
And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames  
With superhuman inhumanities,  
Long-famous glories, immemorial shames—  
And crawling slowly back, have by degrees  
Regained cool peaceful air in wonder—  
Why speak they not of comrades that went under?

*'Spring Offensive', Wilfred Owen  
Written in 1918 probably at Ripon*

A prayer for nations to avoid the horrors of war

O God of the nations,  
as we look to that day when you will gather people  
from north and south, east and west,  
into the unity of your peaceable Kingdom,  
guide with your just and gentle wisdom all who take counsel  
for the nations of the world,  
that all your people may spend their days  
in security, freedom, and peace,  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.  
**Amen.**

*We move back to the Nave taking a seat somewhere in the centre*

## **In the Nave**

As well as symbolising the ship of faith sailing through the stages of this life, the Nave prompts thoughts of the Church's care and protection.

### Illness and Recovery

Owen recovered slowly from his shell-shock at Craiglockhart Hospital with enlightened psychiatric therapy. Here he met Siegfried Sassoon, who told him to write poetry based on his own experiences rather than churn out Tennyson-style sonnets. This started Owen off on his war poetry, which impressed Sassoon so much that he introduced him into a circle of London poets including Robert Graves and Arnold Bennett. His poetry began to be more widely accepted and the reaction to his first published poem, 'Miners', in early 1918, encouraged him.

Spending four months in hospital for severely traumatised soldiers inspired one of Owen's most powerful poems on victims of war, written in Ripon: as he wrote to his mother:

Borage Lane, Ripon

25 May 1918

Dearest Mother

I have been 'busy' this evening with a terrific poem called (at present) 'The Deranged'... I am old already for a poet and so little is yet achieved. And I want no limelight, and celebrity is the last infirmity I desire.

Fame is the recognition of one's peers.

I already have more than their recognition. I have the silent and immortal friendship of Graves and Sassoon and those.

Are they not already as many Keatses.

High praise from one who idolised Keats! Owen later changed the title of 'The Deranged' to 'Mental Cases', the poem based on his observations of the worst cases of shell shock. now known as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?  
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,  
Drooping tongues from jays that slob their relish,  
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?  
Stroke on stroke of pain,- but what slow panic,  
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?  
Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms  
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished  
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

-These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.  
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,  
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.  
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,  
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.  
Always they must see these things and hear them,  
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,  
Carnage incomparable, and human squander  
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented  
Back into their brains, because on their sense  
Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;

Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.  
-Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,  
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.  
-Thus their hands are plucking at each other;  
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;  
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,  
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

'Mental Cases', Wilfred Owen  
Written in 1918 at Ripon

After further convalescence in the regimental rearguard at Scarborough, Owen was despatched to Ripon in March 1918 to regain his fitness for frontline service. Here his poetry developed and matured spectacularly. Although notionally stationed at the Ripon South Camp, which occupied a large area of land centred on Hell Wath Common, he rented a room in a cottage on Borrage Lane where he wrote, as he put it, distracted only by the sounds of children playing soldiers outside his window. Every day he would walk down the Fairy Steps from the Camp to his haven on Borrage Lane and then make his way into the city.

He spent the afternoon of his 25<sup>th</sup> and last birthday, March 18<sup>th</sup>, alone in the quiet of the Cathedral probably close to where you are sitting now. Spend a few minutes here putting yourself into Owen's place, thinking quietly how you might respond to the prospect of an imminent despatch to the nightmare of the battle front.

Would you be looking for God's guidance? What would you be looking for?

Now see how Owen captures the tensions of a departure to the front informed by his own experiences of seeing so many soldiers departing from Ripon station — many who would return mentally or physically damaged and some who would never return.

Down the close darkening lanes they sang their way  
To the siding-shed,  
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray  
As men's are, dead.

Dull porters watched them, and a casual tramp  
Stood staring hard,  
Sorry to miss them from the upland camp.

Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp  
Winked to the guard.

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.  
They were not ours:  
We never heard to which front these were sent;

Nor there if they yet mock what women meant  
Who gave them flowers.

Shall they return to beating of great bells  
In wild train-loads?  
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,

May creep back, silent, to village wells,  
Up half-known roads.

*'The Send Off', Wilfred Owen  
Written in 1918 at Ripon*

Let us pray for all those who suffered in the First World War

Father of all, remember your holy promise, and look with love  
on all your people, living and departed.  
On this day we especially ask that you would hold for ever all  
who suffered during the First World War, those who returned  
scarred by warfare, those who waited anxiously at home, and

those who returned wounded, and disillusioned; those who mourned, and those communities that were diminished and suffered loss.

Remember too those who acted with kindly compassion, those who bravely risked their own lives for their comrades, and those who in the aftermath of war, worked tirelessly for a more peaceful world.

And as you remember them, remember us, O Lord; grant us peace in our time and a longing for the day when people of every language, race, and nation will be brought into the unity of Christ's kingdom.

This we ask in the name of the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

*The final stop is at the Chapel of Justice and Peace in the North Aisle*

## **At the Chapel of Justice and Peace**

In a Cathedral that prays, looks and works daily for the coming of God's Kingdom on earth, this Chapel serves as a reminder that we hope for the justice and peace of God's universal reign.

Return to the Front

Owen returned to the front, winning the Military Cross in action on 1<sup>st</sup> October, but on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1918, a week before the Armistice, he was killed during an attempt to cross the Sambre Canal.

Ironically his parents received the dreaded telegram of regret at noon on the 11<sup>th</sup> November, the day Peace was declared while, as his brother Harold later recalled, the church bells were still chiming and the bands still playing.

His mother Susan wrote after his death:

‘Oh! how he hated war and all its horrors but he felt he must go out and share it with his boys. His nature never changed...’.

The powerful words on the wall in front of you, written in Ripon in 1918, are taken from the preface to Owen's planned first book of

poems which he was putting together during the weeks that he was here in Ripon.

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives – survives Prussia – my ambition and those names will have achieved themselves fresher fields than Flanders...'

*Preface to the Collected Poems,  
Wilfred Owen, Written in 1918 at Ripon*

Sit here for a while and consider your reactions to this journey. Consider your response to the horrors of war, which Owen captures in this poem 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', where provocatively he juxtaposes scenes in a church with the awfulness of the battlefield

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

*'Anthem for Doomed Youth', Wilfred Owen  
Written in 1917 at Craiglockhart*

Let us now look into our own hearts as we recite the Coventry Litany  
of Reconciliation

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.  
The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race,  
class from class,  
**Father, forgive.**  
The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is  
not their own,  
**Father, forgive.**  
The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays  
waste the earth,  
**Father, forgive.**  
Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,  
**Father, forgive.**  
Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the  
homeless, the refugee,  
**Father, forgive.**  
The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and  
children,  
**Father, forgive.**  
The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,  
**Father, forgive.**

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another,  
as God in Christ forgave you.

## Final Prayer

Heavenly Father,  
who called your Church to witness that you were in Christ  
reconciling the world to yourself:  
help us to bring trust where there is fear,  
understanding where there is prejudice,  
and hope where there is despair,  
that the world may know the power of  
your reconciling love;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

This Cathedral, with the faith in the risen Christ that it proclaims,  
offers a message of hope even in the darkest of history's chapters.

The following words of St Paul attest to this:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us,  
who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but  
gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us  
everything else?

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who  
justifies.

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was  
raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes  
for us.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or  
distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or  
sword?

As it is written,

'For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
We are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*Romans 8:31-39*







Sources of further information:

We are grateful to members of the Wilfred Owen Association for their help in preparing this version of the pilgrimage for use on the centenary of Wilfred Owen's 25<sup>th</sup> and last birthday- 17<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

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