

Prayer of the Month • March 2011

Father, if He, the Christ, were Thy Revealer,
Truly the First Begotten of the Lord,
Then must Thou be a Sufferer and a Healer,
Pierced to the heart by the sorrow of the sword.

Then must it mean, not only that Thy sorrow
Smote Thee that once upon the lonely tree,
But that to-day, to-night, and on the morrow,
Still it will come, O Gallant God, to Thee.

from 'The Suffering God' by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, 1883–1929, in *The Unutterable Beauty* (1927)

In practice, if not in theory, we often treat God Almighty and Jesus Christ as virtually unrelated. But if God is most truly revealed in Jesus Christ then God himself in essence, as it were, is a sufferer. Kennedy adds the word 'healer' too. The sufferer does not only suffer but provides the means to come out of the other side of suffering. In Kennedy's words we sense the solidarity of suffering, a greater solidarity than human companionship. This is 'God on our side' in a different sense, not in wielding the sword but in receiving its stabs. The suffering of Calvary is vivid today, echoing in the suffering that continues to be inflicted on human beings; and God still suffers. Kennedy's writing is immersed in the context of his own times, the searing experience of the Great War, the war to end all wars, as it was called; the name we give it now, the First World War, says something different.

Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy (1883–1929), commonly known as 'Woodbine Willie' due to his habit of distributing cigarettes to the troops in the First World War, was an Anglican priest and poet. He was the seventh of nine children, born to Jeanette Anketell and William Studdert Kennedy in Leeds, where his father was a parish priest. Geoffrey was educated at Leeds Grammar School and Trinity College, Dublin. After training for a year he was ordained and became a curate in Rugby, and then, in 1914, the Vicar of St Paul's, Worcester. On the outbreak of war, he volunteered as a chaplain to the army on the Western Front, where he gained his nick-name, handing out cigarettes as he also ministered to the soldiers spiritually. He won a Military Cross in 1917 after running into no man's land to help the wounded during a battle. He came out of the war converted to pacifism and Christian socialism, and wrote a number of poems about his experiences. After the war he became parish priest at St Edmund the Martyr, Lombard Street. His later writings are more politically charged, for example in *Democracy and the Dog-Collar* (1921). His poetry was collected together and published in *The Unutterable Beauty* (1927). Kennedy was a popular preacher and moved from parish ministry to work for the Industrial Christian Fellowship, undertaking speaking tours, and attracting crowds who liked his mixture of traditional sacramental theology with unconventional theological ideas. It was on one of these tours that he was taken ill, and died in Liverpool on 8 March 1929, the date on which he is commemorated in the Church of England Calendar.

Colin Lunt