

## Remembrance Sunday 2017

*The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!'*  
2 Samuel 18:33

The words from the Second Book of Samuel in the Bible, describing the moment when King David heard of the death of his son, Absalom. The sense of grief from these words is palpable, particularly when we know that Absalom had seized the throne from his father, who was forced to flee Jerusalem and to raise the army against his own son. This moment when he regains his kingdom becomes a day of mourning rather than of joy when he hears of the death of Absalom.

The reason I recount this Biblical passage is because the phrase used by David to mourn his son appears on the largest of the war monuments within this church. Most of you will have passed it on your way into the building this morning if you were outside at the war memorial, and yet, because of its position it is largely unnoticed. It is in the tower, over the door up to the belfry and commemorates the three Kennedy brothers, Paul, Archibald and John. Carved by an Italian sculptor, it depicts life-like figures of the three, each shown in their uniforms.

Their father Sir John Kennedy, was a diplomat in the Foreign Office, serving in St Petersburg, Rome, and the Republic of Chile, before ending his career as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of the King of Romania – the British Ambassador in other words! Their mother, Evelyn, was a granddaughter of the First Baron Skelmersdale. Following Sir John's retirement, the family moved to Kent, and then following his death in 1912, to Burnthouse, Tylers Green, Cuckfield.

All three brothers were Captains (as was their surviving brother Leo, who later became a reporter for The Times Newspaper).

Archibald, a regular captain in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, and the oldest of the brothers was killed less than a month after the First World War broke out in the Battle of Le Cateau, in what was effectively a rout. It was caused when the British Expeditionary Force was forced to retreat following the Battle of Mons. Reaching Le Cateau on roads crowded by civilian refugees, the First Corps under Haig was able to march almost unmolested, but The Second Corps was confronted by large elements of German troops which threatened the line of retreat. They held the German attack, allowing time for the orderly retreat to continue, but the hugely outnumbered British troops lost nearly 8,000 of their number, although slowing the German advance.

On the memorial, Lady Kennedy had this carved: TO MY DEARLY LOVED SON ARCHIBALD EDWARD - CAPTAIN 93RD ARGYLL & SUTHERLAND HIGHLANDERS

BORN 7 SEPT. 1878 KILLED AT LE CATEAU - *THE LORD KNOWETH THEM THAT ARE HIS.* – a quote for the Second Letter to Timothy.

Paul was the next. He embarked with the 3rd battalion of the Rifle Brigade for France on 8th September 1914 and was wounded in that month (just days after his brother was killed) and invalided home. He was then attached to the 8th battalion in December for a short period of time before they embarked for France. He was later offered employment on the staff which he declined. He joined the 2nd battalion at the front in March 1915 and was killed by a sniper at Aubers Ridge near Fromelles on 9th May 1915 when leading his company. Although mortally wounded, he sent two privates who wanted to stay with him back to safety. His mother had a large Calvary of the crucified Christ erected on the site where he was last seen after the end of the war. It still stands today, originally the only memorial marking the battle, but now within view of the newly dedicated 2010 war cemetery (the first created since the end of the Second World War) following the discovery of the burial pits of allied soldiers which the German army dug when they pushed forward.

At the base of Lady Kennedy's cross are the words: To the glory of God and in memory of my beloved son, Paul Adrian Kennedy, Commanding B company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Rifle Regiment, and of his friends, Talbot Fitzroy Eden Stanhope, Henry Ralph Hardinge and Edward Henry Leigh as well as all those who fell in the attack on the Aubers Ridge – 9<sup>th</sup> May 1915. *Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the Temple of my God* – and then, in French: *'Pray for them'*

It is Paul, who has the quote *My Son my Son, would that I had died instead of you, my son, my son* on the memorial in the tower. After the service, you will find some details there which I was able to find about Paul.

John, the youngest child of the family, was killed in April 1918. He too was in the Rifle Brigade and was killed in the Second Battle of Villers Bretonneux – the first tank battle in history. The fighting around Villers-Bretonneux in April resulted in the following casualties: Australian 2,473, British 9,529 and French 3,500. German losses were 8,000–10,400 men. John Kennedy lies in Crucifix Corner – the British Cemetery, and so called because it is near a Calvary.

Lady Kennedy's grief over the death of her youngest child is perhaps summed up in the inscription on the tower memorial: TO MY DARLING SON JOHN PATRICK FRANCIS THE RIFLE BRIGADE BORN 28 SEPT. 1891 KILLED AT VILLERS BRETONNEUX 24 APRIL 1918 YOUNGEST SON OF SIR JOHN G. KENNEDY - *CAUSA ALIIS VITA CUR FRUERENTUR ERAT*

I must admit that I had to go to a friendly Latin teacher to get a translation of the text – it is a curious mixture of tenses, but essentially says: *The purpose of life with others was the reason why they enjoy companionship now.*

The Kennedy brothers' names don't appear on the war memorials in the church and churchyard, presumably because Lady Kennedy had not long moved to Cuckfield.

However, there were two other Cuckfield families who also experienced the sorrow of the death of three siblings: Ernest, Frank and Edward Henley, whose parents lived at 4 Lavender Cottages, Ansty, and Charles, Percy and William Selby, whose parents lived in Brook Street.

You will see from the War Memorial that 1917 was the most terrible for Cuckfield in terms of loss, and it is almost unimaginable for us to understand the scale of investment in the war effort. One has only to look at the memorial boards in the Queen's Hall listing the hundreds of young men who fought – and this is without considering the Women's Land Army, and so many others – virtually the whole community- caught up in supporting not just those in the services, but, increasingly, those bereaved in such a terrible conflict.

In the passage from St John's Gospel we just heard, we join the disciples at the Last Supper they shared with Jesus as he taught them about abiding in love. Jesus says these words to each of us:

*Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

Christians regard these words as profound for the whole of humanity, because this call to abide – to live with and for each other in love, is said by Jesus in the knowledge that within hours he will give his life for the world - self-giving expressed in the words, 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' Jesus gives himself for each one of us – a personal gift of love.

In this, Jesus draws humanity into the knowledge of living Resurrection lives – lives where we are called to invest ourselves in and for the lives of other people. This, I believe, is where we find *who* we are called to be. This is not always easy for us, yet such interaction can take place in so many ways and at so many levels, and enables others to be drawn into the knowledge of God-given love which is at the heart of all that exists.

Today we remember with gratitude the sacrifice made for the freedom we enjoy today from those who fought and those gave their lives in the two world wars. We remember too those different scenarios of action in which our armed forces have and continue to participate in around the globe, down to the present day.

As we give thanks for their gift made for us, may we too give ourselves to others in love, remembering the words of Jesus:

*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that **your** joy may be complete. Amen*

**John 15: 9-17**

Jesus said, 'Just as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup> I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.'