

**“THE WAYS OF GOD ARE STRANGE -  
FAITH IN THE TRENCHES OF THE FIRST WORLD  
WAR”**

The Chavasse Lecture

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**St Peter's College, Oxford**

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As delivered

There comes a point in the preparation of every public lecture when in doing all your research and amassing so much material you start to regret taking on the commission and ask yourself why you're doing it! I was afflicted by such a moment when I had read so much about the Chavasse family, about the cause and course of the 1st World War and the role of the Church of England that I could no longer see the wood from the trees or, most importantly, identify a theme for this lecture.

But there were several reasons for persevering. I went to a military boarding school, the Duke of York's Royal Military School, which was founded for the orphans of the Napoleonic Wars and to this day gives priority of admission to boys and girls whose parents have been killed or injured in action. Battle dress was our uniform, marching to meals our daily routine and gathering around the War Memorial every Remembrance Sunday with veteran old boys our annual pilgrimage. My boarding house was named after Lord Kitchener whose memorial fund gave me a grant to go up to university.

Secondly, as a successor to the second Bishop of Liverpool, Francis Chavasse, I know how much that city takes pride in the fact that his son, Captain Noel Chavasse, was the only soldier to gain a double VC in the first World War.

And a third reason is connected with the Victoria Cross. My wife's great grandfather, General Sir Charles John Stanley Gough, was awarded the Victoria Cross, and her family has a unique place in the annals of the award because his brother, Sir Hugh Henry Gough and his son, Sir John Edmund Gough, were also awarded the Victoria Cross.

But there's a fourth reason for persisting with this lecture (apart from fear of incurring the Master's displeasure) and that is the very winsomeness of Noel Chavasse who is commemorated in this Chapel not least by the Cross that graced his grave and whose extraordinary example of duty and courage and faith burns like an inextinguishable primus stove flame out of the muddy and bloody trenches of the first world war. These primus stoves which Noel was always trying to get for his soldiers to bring some comfort to their comfortless and cheerless lives.

I once asked Christopher Wright who edited the Revised Edition of 'The Victoria Cross and the George Cross - the Complete History' if he could sum up the qualities that defined the character of those who received the Victoria Cross. He identified three values that defined the character of most of those who won the VC: modesty, innocence and otherworldliness. The letters of Noel Chavasse from the College Archive reveal these characteristics.

Those letters and Ann Clayton's "Chavasse Double VC" have informed my understanding of our subject. But the legacy of his modesty is that in all the current commemorations of the 1st World War there is little reference to his unique bravery and contribution – that is apart from these Chavasse Lectures instituted by St Peter's in this University.

Indeed, it was a disappointing surprise to read the definitive and magisterial account of "The Church of England and the 1st World War" by Alan Wilkinson and find no mention at all of Noel and only a few, mostly negative, references to his father, Bishop Francis Chavasse. I'm afraid even history has its prejudices. Although I suppose when it comes to historians they should be called post-judices!

That therefore is another reason for persevering with the Lecture so as we don't break our promise "we will remember them" and especially those who showed the world, to quote the citation of the Victoria Cross, the "most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty". But in remembering him through this lecture I want to explore one aspect, what was it that shaped his faith and his sense of duty.

I have taken as the title of this Lecture a quote from the closing line of a poem by Siegfried Sassoon. It's called simply "They". It's a dialogue between a bishop and a soldier.

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
'New right to breed an honourable race,  
'They have challenged Death and dared him face to  
face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
'And Bert's gone syphilitic" you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.'  
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

In just 12 lines the poet exposes his view of the relationship between the church and the army in the First War. The "bishop" articulates the exhortations of church leaders encouraging young men to go to war; and the "boys" list the litany of their injuries. The chasm is exposed. With searing irony the soldiers flatten the bishop's pastoral voice intoning that on their return "They will not be the same" and reply with a dead-pan antiphon "We're none of us the same." Leaving the bishop with the spiritual equivalent of a shrug of the shoulders: "The ways of God are strange!"

Alan Wilkinson's well researched book exposes the public positions about the war adopted by the Church of England, its bishops and archbishops. He examines the role of the chaplains and in particular their relationships with the soldiers.

He also reports on the aftermath of the war and how the Church set up commissions and tried to learn from how it had ministered to the soldiers and to the nation. It is, as you might expect, a mixed picture.

The hierarchy of the Church, including Noel's father, the second Bishop of Liverpool, stood shoulder to shoulder with the Government in advancing moral arguments and theological metaphors for going to war. Sassoons' poem captures this with concepts such as "a just cause" and attacking "the anti-Christ". Interestingly, on the other side, one of the German army chaplains who was to become a formative theologian of the 20th century was advancing similar theological arguments for going to war "for the sake of the love of the Fatherland and for the sake of pride as German" - his name? Paul Tillich (Quoted from "Empty Space" unpublished play by T H Jones).

But there was another religious dimension to the First World War which is often overlooked and has been pointed up by Eugene Rogan in his book "The Fall of the Ottomans". When the Ottoman Empire entered the War on the side of Germany in November 1914 the Sultan declared it to be a jihad. In fact, he issued five Fatwas.

Germany hoped that the fatwas would unsettle the hundred million Muslims living under British rule in India and Africa. Given the religious rhetoric of Church leaders in Britain and the fact that church bells were rung all over England to celebrate the capture of Jerusalem in 1917 it makes me wonder to what extent could the 1914 - 1918 conflict be understood as a Holy War. But that's beyond the scope of this lecture!

Serving the soldiers of the British Army there were some outstanding Chaplains. Noel's brother, Christopher, was greatly loved by his men and very popular. He, of course, became the first Master of St Peter's and then Bishop of Rochester. Furthermore, three military chaplains were awarded the Victoria Cross - the Revs Edward Mellish, William Addison, and T B Hardy.

There is also the remarkable case of the Rev B W Vann, who was so frustrated by the delay in appointing him a military chaplain that he joined the Artists' Rifles and ended up an acting Lieutenant Colonel. He was killed in the last weeks of the War and was posthumously awarded the VC for his gallantry in France. Though not officially an Army Chaplain he held religious services for his men.

But by no means every chaplain was able to identify with his men. One of the reasons was that clergy were exempt from being called up and another was that in the first stage of the war those who enlisted as chaplains were not allowed to go to the front line and so never fully shared in the harsh realities of the trenches and of the fighting.

Noel himself was scathing about one particular chaplain whom he dismissed as “a washout. He never goes round talking to the men, trying to cheer them up, but only preaches on a Sunday. He is an old dear, who ought never to have come out.” (Chavasse Double VC: Ann Clayton. P 131) He lamented that one of the chaplains even took his leave and left his men at Christmas. A polar contrast to the incarnation. What an irony that at the time of celebrating God rolling up his sleeves and trousers to wade through the mud flats of the earth his priests should have vacated the trenches and taken a holiday!

Noel Chavasse was the opposite. Not a chaplain, like his brother, but an officer in the Royal Army Medical Corps. By all accounts, he loved his men and they loved him. He cared for them like a mother.

According to Private E J Finlay there was a “gentle and almost feminine way” about Capt Dr Chavasse. “For all Dr Chavasse’s care and love of his men, one must play the game with him. While carrying rations along an interminable long march I collapsed with a fever and was escorted to the Medical Dug Out to await the Doctor. In his gentle, and almost feminine way, he just says, “Good gracious, we must get some Mother Segal’s Syrup for you ...” (Ann Clayton page 103)

He had an empathy with his men, the like of which was not shared by all officers who had little understanding of shell-shock or of what today is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Those who injured themselves deliberately so as to escape the horrors of the frontline, the smell, the rats, the stench of death would as a deterring example to others be court-marshalled and even shot. Noel understood these fears. In so far as he was able and whenever possible he would enlist those recovering as stretcher-bearers and orderlies. Exemplifying Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘If’:

“If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs ...

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue  
or walk with kings nor lose the common touch ....”

Noel Chavasse seemed to have that “common touch” a natural affinity with the common man. Ann Clayton in her biography offers a clue to the source of his humanity. In 1902 at the age of 18 Noel suffered a sporting injury which stopped him playing rugby. The following year the family doctor suggested he use his time helping out at the local Reformatory School in Grafton Street. These voluntary schools were set up to rescue ‘destitute and abandoned Boys and Girls from present wretchedness and vice, and from future criminality’. They came from criminogenic families and lived in squalid streets. The schools were an intervention into their chaotic lives.

Noel threw himself into the activities, organising games and going on summer camps. So committed to them did he become that when he went up to Oxford “he gave up part of every summer vacation to the needs of the Grafton Street boys”. The experience was formative. It was with the young people of Grafton Street, on the edge of Toxteth, that Noel’s life and faith were earthed.

In Michael Snape's book 'God and the British Soldier' he records how 4,970,000 men volunteered, 22% of males in the UK. He adds that the ranks were "largely filled with unskilled men from the lowest strata of the urban working class." It is one of the reasons that the chaplains were often out of their depth with the ordinary soldier and why Noel because of his immersion in the lives of the urban working class in Liverpool was one of the few able to make a real connection with his men.

Robert Graves was excoriating about the regimental chaplains for whom they had no respect. "If the regimental chaplains had shown one tenth the courage, endurance and other human qualities that the regimental doctors showed ..... the British Expeditionary Force might well have started a religious revival".

After the war the Church of England published a report in 1919 "The Army and Religion" which seemed to put the blame on the soldier for the lack of connection with religion. "Throughout our evidence two complaints recur (1) that there is an absence of serious thought about religion, and (2) that there is ignorance of the faith and truths of Christianity."

The report suggests that this was a failure of religious education in schools in the second part of the 19th century. Spike Milligan put it more bluntly. “Men in uniform can’t really be considered religious, unless it be a Christian profundity that makes a Gunner say Jesus Christ! when he drops a shell on his foot.”

There were of course some legendary clergy like Studdert Kennedy and Tubby Clayton who gained a genuine following amongst the soldiers. But in spite of commendations by General Haig and Archbishop Davidson there were real divisions of class and culture between chaplains and soldiers. It prompted a comment in the Spectator on 8th January 1916:

“Suppose the Church were mobilised so that the majority of the younger clergy and all the ordinands were set free for service in the Army, the situation at the end of the war might be very different from that which we have been anticipating. There is no life more intimate than that of the barrack-room. There is no life where the essential characters of men are so fully revealed as the life of the trench. Those of the combatant clergy who returned from the war would know all that was worth knowing of the characters of ordinary men ...

... With such men as clergy a new era might dawn for the church in this land, and the Kingdom of Heaven be brought very nigh.”

This incarnational immersing of one’s life in the real world of those you serve was exemplified by Noel Chavasse both in his experience of working class life in Toxteth and in his going onto the Front Line with his men. This in Christian understanding is where God is to be found. Not so much in the fine phrases of sermons and services but in a life earthed on the streets and in the trenches.

How the church has yet to learn this lesson a century on! The Church of England is still marooned from swathes of ordinary people and lacks the diversity of the nation at large. It holds its own in certain mainly prosperous middle class areas but its presence and impact on outer estates and in inner cities are weak and shrinking. This is the opposite to the Gospel narrative where Christ is found to be popular with ordinary people and shunned by the ruling class of his day.

I am conscious that next year commemorates the centenary of Noel Chavasse's death and also marks the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. (The

Four Hundredth Anniversary was interrupted by the War with Germany.) The Five Hundredth will of course be contextualised by Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. But will the celebration of the Reformation cause the church to re-examine its own mission and its own connectedness with the nation it serves?

What the 1st World War revealed was that one hundred years ago ordinary men and women who served in the forces had little understanding of Christian doctrine and dogma. Clearly as they lived on the edge of death thoughts turned to God and the after-life. As Alan Wilkinson's book shows there was a marked increase in spiritualism, seances and mediums and in the church a newly pronounced emphasis on praying for the dead. This offended those of evangelical convictions including Bishop Chavasse who wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury to complain. But what is significant is that this is an example of popular sentiment affecting liturgy and doctrine.

It is similar to the way the popular reaction to the death of the Princess of Wales affected funeral liturgy.

Instead of a sermon we now have eulogies where the focus is on the deceased rather than on the hope of heaven; where contemporary songs such as “My Way” complement or supplant or even contradict hymns of Christian conviction. What these examples show is that in extremis people grope for a meaning and a purpose they can connect with and that if the Church cannot respond in a way that touches their inner being they will make up or adapt their own rituals.

The church may well huff and puff in all its reports but there is no substitute for the earthy engagement that we see in the brief life of Noel Chavasse. He wearied of some of the religious services he saw, he lamented over the inability of chaplains and the officer class to understand fully the needs of the ordinary soldier. He went over the top time and again to rescue the men he had come to know intimately in Grafton Street. Those Grafton Street boys were a major influence on Noel's life as were the socialists Keir Hardie and George Lansbury whom he had heard speak at Oxford and declared “I have never heard a man speak better”.

I wonder whether if Noel had lived beyond the war he might have become one of the leading Christian socialists in the mould of William Temple.

I watched Jeremy Paxman's Chavasse lecture and was struck by his argument that the First World War "changed the relationship between the Government and the governed." Had Noel lived I imagine not only would he have welcomed that changing relationship but also he would have articulated a Christian basis for such a change.

Much will be known of Noel's 1st class honours, his Oxford blue, his Olympic athleticism, his military and medical career and his VC and bar. His devotion to duty mirrored another of his heroes, General Gordon, who "stuck to his duty all the way through". So did Noel. The epitaph on the cross that graced his grave, "Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends" explain his sense of duty.

And those men he died rescuing WERE his friends, boys and their like he'd known in Liverpool's Grafton Street. The very men he'd been inspired to serve by Hardie and Lansbury and Christ himself.

Where was faith in the trenches of the 1st World War? It was in the likes of Noel Chavasse and his sacrifice. In this modest and dutiful person did God draw near to the George's and Bill's and Jim's and Bert's in the trenches. Not in the detached tones of the bishop of Sassoon's poem but in the military doctor who said "Duty called and called me to obey". These were his dying words.

No wonder his father wrote "Our hearts are almost broken, for, oh!, how we loved him. Your dearest mother is particular in her grief, so brave and calm not withstanding. What should we do in such sorrow as this, if we could not rest on the character of God".

And this is just the point, the character of God that Bishop Chavasse believed in was engraved in the character of both sons, the divine and the human, who sacrificed their lives for others.

They did so - Christ and Noel - trusting in providence and destiny. This destiny was summed up by Noel's grandmother who died four years before Noel was killed having written the famous hymn:

Thine forever! God of Love  
Hear us from thy throne above;  
Thine for ever may we be  
here and for eternity”

Such was the faith of the Chavasse family as they grieved for this “modest, innocent and other-worldly man”. That such a person of faith and duty and courage and goodness should sojourn for so short a time on the earth does indeed prove that the “ways of God are strange”.

Yet a more fitting way to end would be to echo Noel’s own faith by saying a prayer which would simply be: “Grant us the grace so to follow his good example”

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