

# SENT OUT LIKE LAMBS AMONG WOLVES

## Sermon on Luke 10:1-11, 16 -20

*University church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford*

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May I speak in the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This week in politics has shown that we live in difficult times and face confusing and hard days, months, perhaps years ahead. But let's just step back and imagine what was facing the young, undertrained, under resourced soldiers of the western front in the First World War.

The first day of the Battle of the Somme, in northern France, was the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army and one of the most infamous days of World War One. British and German troops faced each other's trenches, only separated by a few hundred yards of "no-man's land". On 1 July 1916, the British forces suffered nearly 60,000 casualties including nearly 20,000 fatalities. In that day only three square miles of territory and yet the scale of the carnage is overwhelming

And despite this horrendous bloodshed, the British soldiers were unable to break through the German defences. This first day set a bloody precedent and as we know the Somme campaign wore on for another five months and, in all, more than a million soldiers from the British, German and French armies were wounded or killed. A terrible tragedy has ensued.

Two years ago I found myself walking in those very same battlefields along the frontline looking for a grave. It was a deeply moving and sombre experience and amongst many thoughts I remember being taken aback at how close the British and German trenches had been to each other. I was also struck by a posse of young teenagers, who after bundling out of their coach, with giggles and iPhones, fell silent so quickly. They were soon struck by the enormity of The Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, a war memorial to 72,246 missing British Empire servicemen, and who had no known grave.

They like so any other visitors were taken a back and humbled by the rows upon rows of white crosses. The graves engendered a reverence and respect even amongst those youngsters, who should have felt so distanced from the battle. But everyone visiting the battlefield, young or old, whatever nationality, seemed called to moments of silent prayer and reflection. The stillness, sadness, and the enormity of tragedy were overwhelming.

One of those who was fatally killed that summer was my great Uncle Charles Nye. On 16th August 1916 he was shot down in Delville Wood, a battle in the Somme. A 25 year old young

Lieutenant in the Northamptonshire regiment, I feel deeply connected to him and his story as I was born on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1963. My Grandmother, Charles' sister, thought that my arrival in the world was some sort of message of hope, a symbol that new life can grow out of the tragic loss of old.

But I am not alone; many of us will have stories and personal memories connected to the battlefield. Our parishioner, Jenyth Worsley, just last week sent me a poem called *Recollections of the Somme* that she wrote about her mother's experience of being a nurse on the front line.

*"My mother collected soldiers from the battle, wounded ones, some missing an arm, legs blown off, faces black with pain, groaning, hoping for her ambulance to drive them to through the mud to the hospital"*

And of course we are familiar with some of the greatest poetry ever written about the reality of being sent forth over the top into the hands of the enemy. Here is an extract from 'The Night Patrol' by Arthur Graeme West (1891-1917).

*"And we placed our hands on the topmost sand-bags, leapt, and stood  
A second with curved backs, then crept to the wire,  
Wormed ourselves tinkling through, glanced back, and dropped.  
The sodden ground was splashed with shallow pools,  
And tufts of crackling cornstalks, two years old,  
No man had reaped, and patches of spring grass.  
Half-seen, as rose and sank the flares, were strewn  
The wrecks of our attack: the bandoliers,  
Packs, rifles, bayonets, belts, and haversacks,  
Shell fragments, and the huge whole forms of shells  
Shot fruitlessly—and everywhere the dead.  
Only the dead were always present—present  
As a vile sickly smell of rotteness."*

As then men went over the top into No-mans-land perhaps they felt they were being sent like lambs to the slaughter, inadequately trained and without proper equipment; fed to the wolves.

In today's Gospel (Luke 10:1-11,16-20) we have heard about Jesus sending forth His 70 followers out into the hostile wilderness, to fling them into great peril to proclaim His name. Jesus evokes the image of Lambs going to slaughter - there is little chance of survival as they are surrounded by wolves snarling with their vicious white teeth. And with that image Jesus gives his followers full warning of the dangers of what lays ahead for them on their journey into unknown lands.

He also, on this very warning, however builds expectation of quiet confidence for although Luke 10 verse 3 ends with '*lambs in the midst of wolves,*' (Luke 10:3) it begins with '*Go I send you forth,*' and that is insurance enough, for Jesus followers to have the courage to set forth into new households and villages. Jesus promises to defend them when they see the wolf. And in

doing so He acknowledges, before their trip, the ferocity of the opposition that true followers of Christ could encounter.

Also when Jesus said, *"I am sending you like lambs among wolves"*, He promises to provide for all their needs, so that they want neither baggage nor money, not even a staff (Luke 10:4). A normal traveller without any of these would be in dire straits, but His followers are not to carry such things, because they carry the protection and promises of their Lord Jesus. And of course we cannot now think about the image of the lamb without being mindful of the New Testament image of the Pascal Lamb, who is slain to redeem His people, appearing at the beginning of John's Gospel when John the Baptist sees Jesus and exclaims, *"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."* (John 1:29).

And what message did Jesus ask them to deliver to the houses holds they visited? He commands them to them to bring Peace. The first thing He asks them to say when entering the house is *"The Kingdom of God is near you. Peace on this house."* (Luke 10:6), emphasising that *"Jesus came proclaiming peace"* (Eph 2:17) to all.

The theologian Tom Wright says this would be challenging as

*"Jesus' contemporaries for the most part do not want peace – peace with their traditional enemies the Samaritans or peace with the feared and hated Romans. They wanted all-out war that would bring God justice swiftly to their aid and get their enemies once and for all".*

But they were to go forth also with a word of warning as well as an invitation. For the villagers to reject Jesus now or his followers was to not only reject the Son but His Father as well. At the heart of Jesus's Kingdom message is the creation of a new people, a people who recognize Jesus as God's true son, the Messiah, and a people who, through the work of Jesus, are getting to know God for themselves as Father. *"He who listens to you listens to me. He who rejects you rejects me, but he who rejects me rejects Him who sent me"* (Luke 10:16).

The followers were not going out to new territory to sell a brand name or product but a vision of change. Tom Wright again said *"Jesus knew the seventy would stand out and was counting on it because they had a message to share-a message so vital and life-changing that everyone needed to hear it"*. What counts in this mission is the sharing of the concept of a New Creation of Peace and Mercy to all who follow Christ, *"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come"* (Galatians 6:15).

And so we might ask ourselves did anything new or worthy of peace come from the horrors of the Battle of the Somme? Can some lessons of unity and hope can be gathered from the trenches.

Perhaps an example of unity is illustrated in the grave of my Uncle. Charles Nye rests in the Cerisy-Gailly Military Cemetery where British plots sit harmoniously with the large French Cemetery. The historian Mary Middlebrooke felt that there was some element of symbolism in *"that when the British were looking for places to rebury the dead after the war, the French suggested this*

*plot so that the joint allied effort on the Somme could be commemorated here” - in unity and cohesion (The Middlebrook Guide to the Somme Battlefields: A Comprehensive Coverage from Crecy to the World Wars).*

Similarly The Revd Dr Robert Beaken author of *The Church of England and the Home Front 1918* felt that despite the horrendous numbers killed on the front line some learning occurred to help end the war:

*“The British army may be said to have spent 1917 learning the lessons of the Somme and to have used those lessons, in 1918, achieve victory. The tragedy was that all this was accomplished with such great and wrenching human loss”.*

And of course not all the soldiers died. Charles’s brother Archibald Nye did indeed survive the Great War and went on to be the Vice Chief of Staff of the Imperial Army in the Second World War. He helped command an army to victory to bring about lasting peace in Europe. He and many like him represent a symbol of hope that by understanding the lessons of the First World War eventually the Second World War was won and peace restored to Europe.

Can we carry forward those lessons of peace, unity and hope today? We too as Christians are sent out - thank God not “over the top” - but out of this church this morning into the street and into our city, to carry a message of reconciliation and tolerance. In a week where reported hate crimes towards the “other” have gone up 400%, where foreign communities feel attacked by modern day wolves, with bad and abusive language, we have to make sure that Jesus Kingdom message of peace still reigns. These incidents are real and a frightening indictment on our society. Sadly we are reduced to a Bishop having to remind his city of the need to resurrect the second commandment to restore peace in his streets.

The Rt Revd Bishop of Birmingham, David Urquhart, yesterday urged all his followers to build bridges by carrying out small acts of kindness for neighbours and to show that the city will not give in to hate or division. He has established the grassroots “Love your Neighbours Campaign” supported by faith and community leaders after the rise of hate crimes (Birmingham Daily News).

It could be that we personally will face racial or political abuse this coming week or be party to tensions and disagreements... or see others affected by such unrest. But as followers of Christ we are called to be imitators of Christ. The image of the lamb is also a reminder that the kingdom of God will be marked by peace and reconciliation. We must be brave and confront the attitudes and behaviours that do not reflect God's intentions. We need to build on bonds of friendship, celebrate diversity, and create simple acts of kindness that express our love and acceptance of our neighbour.

As we go forth let us remember the famous words of mystic and Carmelite nun St Teresa of Avila’s “Christ Has No Body” (1515-1582), which still have resonance for us today.

*Christ has no body but yours,*

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

**Amen.**