

The Way of the Cross

with reflections drawn from the First World War Conscientious Objectors

Introduction

Wilfred Owen, the soldier poet, recognised how the suffering of his men in the First World War matched the stages of Christ's own passion and death. Four months before he was himself killed in France, Owen was training troops in England and wrote:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work - teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his Supper to see that there were not complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands at attention before all his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha. ¹

Equally vivid descriptions are to be found in letters and diaries of the conscientious objectors of the First World War. They did not presume to compare their suffering to that of men in the trenches, and they faced the permanent accusation that they were cowards who had taken the soft option.

But as they endured humiliating and brutal punishment, and frequent threats of the death penalty, many were sustained by the example of Christ. In his cell in Richmond Castle John 'Bert' Brocklesby sketched an image of Jesus collapsing under the cross, with these words from a hymn: 'Every cross grows light beneath the shadow Lord of Thine'.

2016 is the centenary of the introduction of conscription in the First World War, and with it the first opportunity in law for men to declare their conscientious objection to fighting. However, few applicants were actually given the exemption they requested, which meant that many continued to resist military service and went to prison as a consequence. These extracts describing the experience of the 'conchies' are offered as a meditation on the Way of the Cross.

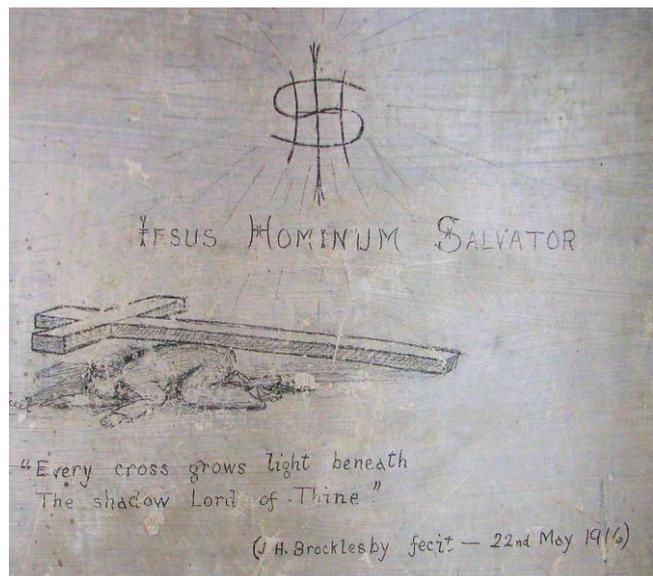


Photo: Clive Barrett

You might like to follow the traditional pattern of prayer for each station.

1. The leader reads out the name of the station and says: "We adore you O Christ and we praise you"
2. Everyone responds: "because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world."
3. Read one or both passages about the experience of the conscientious objectors.
4. After a short period of silence, someone reads the prayer.

¹ Letter to Osbert Sitwell, 4 July 1918

5. Move to the next station, perhaps singing a verse from a hymn or Taizé chant on the way. (e.g. “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”)
6. After the 14th station, say the *Our Father*, *Hail Mary* and *Glory be to the Father*

First Station: Jesus is condemned to death

Alfred Evans was expecting a death sentence for refusing to obey orders in France.

A day or two before the trial a captain came to see me and said, ‘I’ve just left the company office looking over your papers - they’re marked “death” in red at the top. Do you intend to go on with this?’ I said ‘Yes, you see sir, men are dying in agony in the trenches for the things that they believe in and I wouldn’t be less than them.’ To my utter astonishment he stepped back a couple of paces and saluted me and then came forward extending his hand which I then shook heartily. I never saw him before nor since. ²

In a letter home Howard Marten reported his death sentence to his parents:

On the evening of Thursday, June 15, I heard the result of the court-martial. It was read out at a local camp before a large body of men. The court found me guilty of the charges brought against me, and sentenced me to suffer death by being shot. This drastic sentence, however, was commuted to one of penal servitude for ten years. Similar sentences were passed on the three conscientious objectors tried at the same time as myself. I am still at the Field Punishment barracks and have not yet heard anything as to when and where I shall be removed. Through all I have been supported by a sense of the deepest peace, and humbly conscious of my own unworthiness to bear my small share of testimony to the teachings of our dear Lord, and thankful for the blessing of his Holy Spirit. Naturally I think long and often of all the dear ones, and sincerely hope that before being confined to prison I may be given the opportunity of seeing one or more of you, but as yet I know nothing of the future. ³

Prayer

Father, Jesus has taught us that though you are just, yet you are merciful
and rather than condemning us for our many faults and failings
you encourage us always to do better.
We live in a judgemental society
but help us not to judge others or still less, condemn them.
May we always speak up for those who are judged,
whether they be innocent or guilty
and seek to spread compassion and understanding in our world.

² Goodall, Felicity, *We Will Not Go to War: Conscientious Objection during the World Wars*, (Sutton, 1997, republished 2010 by The History Press) p.25

³ Quoted in *The Tribunal*, June 1916

Second Station: Jesus accepts his cross

Harold Blake a Northampton chemist, wrote:

I was asked the size of my boot and gave it, and was then directed to remove one of them. This I did but when required to put on an army boot, I quietly but firmly refused. Then commenced a period of rough handling when the soldiers forced on boots and other articles of army dress. Having satisfied themselves that they had effected some sort of a fit, they turned their attention to packing a kit bag with a complete soldier's kit, and I, finding myself freed from their hands, quickly reached the outside of the boots and tunic. The completion of this manoeuvre being observed, I was the recipient of another violent outburst of filthy invective which might well have made the stoutest heart quake. Two soldiers each seized an arm and held it outstretched horizontally while the heavy kit bag was hung on my back with the cord pressing hard upon my throat, and the tunic, trousers, overcoat and boots were thrown over my arms. ⁴

Prayer

Father, Jesus accepted the heavy burden of the cross
and today millions of children, men and women,
loaded with burdens far beyond their strength,
are forced to labour in ways that bring them no benefit
but only enrich the few, among whom we must number ourselves.
Open our eyes to the injustices of our world.
Give us the strength to struggle on behalf of the oppressed
and the courage to speak up for them
since, like Jesus, they cannot fight for themselves
and have no voice but ours.

Third Station: Jesus falls the first time

Loaded in this manner, wrote Harold Blake, I was dragged and pushed back to the guardroom - a distance of about 200 yards - by the two soldiers who held my arms, and pushed from behind by a third. The pressure of the cord of the kit bag round my throat was causing suffocation, and as I felt consciousness slipping from me, I commenced involuntarily to struggle and effected the partial release of one arm, which was quickly utilized in the direction of removing the obstruction to my respiration, by inserting a finger under the cord. But in doing this I stumbled and fell, and while on the ground I was treated to a volley of kicking from heavy army boots aimed at whatever part of my anatomy presented the best target, the practical assault being reinforced by the inevitable storm of foul abuse. ⁵

Prayer

Father, Jesus fell on a road on which it was all too easy to stumble.
In our world today it is so easy to fall,
whether it be into bad or destructive habits or merely into debt.
Make us more alert to the precariousness of so many lives
that we may work with all those agencies who seek to support the vulnerable
and help them avoid falling into the traps and snares that lie in their way.

⁴ Goodall p.13-14

⁵ ibid p.13-14

Fourth Station: Jesus meets his mother

Harry Stanton remembers one visit at Winchester Prison.

He ushered me into a small room fitted with two parallel counters, a yard apart and with fine wire barriers. Beyond the second barrier was my mother. At first I could find little to say to her, and she was too anxious about my health and circumstances to talk freely before a stranger. But when the warder broke into our conversation to express his views 'as a Christian man on the righteousness of war', my mother firmly reminded him that he had no right to take up so much of the time which was all too short. This had the desired effect, and we talked without further interruption till with a triumphant 'Time's Up!' my guardian hustled me out of the room. ⁶



THE MOTHER OF THE
FIRST
CONSCIENTIOUS
OBJECTOR

He later wrote:

I had faced the possibility of a death sentence before, and now accepted the fact almost without concern, whilst my mind was occupied mechanically and dispassionately with considering the immediate practical effects. It would be a great trial for my mother. ⁷

Prayer

Father, like Mary, mothers suffer today
as they see their children become victims of warfare, poverty,
lack of work, getting in to bad company and so many other
ways.

Help us to be compassionate,
that we may be more aware of the sufferings of the women of
our world,
do all that we can to lighten their burdens
and work with all those who seek to rescue and help their
children.

*Drawing by Frederick Carter which
appeared in 'The Herald' on the
Feast of the Annunciation 1916*

Fifth Station: Simon helps Jesus carry his cross

Many years after the war Harold Steele reminisced:

Sometimes now... I wake and can still feel what handcuffs feel like on my wrists.... And I recall so gratefully how in handcuffs I edged near the bookstall at Victoria Station and out of the corner of my mouth managed to ask a girl (a mere child) at the counter to come round and tweak from my pocket a note I had previously prepared (just in case) telling my father whither I was being

⁶ Goodall p.60

⁷ Ellsworth-Jones, Will, *We Will Not Fight: the Untold Story of World War One's Conscientious Objectors*, (Aurum 2008) p.172

marched off (from Warley Barracks to Chatham Barracks). And I asked her to post it. I recall how eager she was to help me and eagerly promised to post my note at her expense (and she did - most neatly and as in a thriller!) and there were tears in her eyes. I am sure she never guessed I was one of those scoundrelly Conchies. Perhaps she thought I was just a Tommy out of luck. A coat was dangled over my wrists, but it was pretty obvious that I was handcuffed. ⁸

Nearly all the COs who kept diaries or have written memoirs talk of how ordinary soldiers who were initially appalled by their stand soon began to sympathise with them once they listened to their side of the story... Even his guards could warm to Stanton: the warder who locked him in the cells came back after a few minutes with writing paper and an envelope and offered to post a letter for him. 'I was astonished. I had so often been told that any soldier back from the front line would be glad of the chance to shoot me out of hand; yet here was one offering to do me a service at the risk of losing a safe and comfortable job.' A letter was soon going off to his mother. ⁹

Prayer

Father,
I have so often fallen and stumbled on my way through life
but there has always been someone to help me to my feet
and to set me on the right road again.
When I see others bowed down by the weight of their cares
and the burden of daily life
may I be ready to go to their help.
Let it not be out of a sense of obligation or duty
but because I see in them the image of Jesus
who looks to me to bear the burden with him like Simon.

Sixth Station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

Edith Peet visited her husband, Hubert, in prison on the Isle of Wight.

It's so good to think that I can really write to you at last but I find it difficult to know how to begin. But when I look back the time seems very short since I last saw your dear face. I never can be thankful enough that I did have that chance of seeing you, for the memory of the peaceful happy look you had has been with me ever since and I *knew* that whatever came, you would have a quiet mind and feel absolutely certain that the way you had gone was the only way. ¹⁰

The wife of one conscientious objector wrote:

When I met my husband coming out of prison on February 10th last, I was horrified to see how very badly he was suffering from the cold. His face showed this very much, and in addition to this his hands were literally covered with chilblains and the prison doctor had painted them with iodine. I was still more disturbed when he said that was nothing to what they had been. He also told me that for the last few weeks it had been so cold that he had been quite unable to read at all - he

⁸ Steele handwritten memoir

⁹ Ellsworth-Jones p.127

¹⁰ Goodall p.60-61

could only pace up and down his cell. I might say that normally he does not feel cold at all, and I have never known him to have a chilblain on his hands before.' ¹¹

Prayer

Father,
Veronica's simple gesture of kindness
was rewarded with the imprint of Jesus' face
which would remain with her always.
Help me to see the face of Jesus in everyone who comes my way,
but most especially in those who are suffering.
By simple acts of kindness like Veronica's
may those who suffer see something of Jesus in me
and may I become ever more like him.

Seventh Station: Jesus falls the second time

Three brothers, Charles, Fred, and Henry Walker from Hornsey, were repeatedly imprisoned for their conscientious objection. Charles wrote to his sister:

Dear Annie,

Well, we were very soon taken to the parade ground, or rather pushed. We declined to drill or march and our limbs were moved, in the absence of our wills, by a soldier. You must understand that all this, at all times, was punctuated with abusive remarks and bad language. The details of abuse, entreaty, and physical violence are too numerous to mention. We were the laughing stock of the company. The process of drill was again performed in the afternoon with the same result. We were then made to stand at attention by ourselves for about one and a half or two hours under a broiling sun. Harry tottered and fainted.

Yesterday morning we were again brought to the parade ground but, declining to drill were marched to the back of the barracks and were driven and kicked up and down a narrow path. After breakfast we were again taken to the same spot and were this time roughly handled for about an hour or more. We were separated, I being taken to a quiet spot and made to stand in the sun until I fainted. What a strange feeling of relief. I lay in the grass in a short and peaceful sleep but I awoke and beheld the grass and blue sky and was in a happy dream. I wondered where I was, until the presence of two figures bending over me, recalled the overbearing military despotism. ¹²

Prayer

Father,
Jesus must have fallen many times on the painful road to Golgotha.
Help me to be patient with all those who struggle
with addictions and repeated failures
and whose strength and determination fails
so that they fall over and over again.
Help me to be ready always to encourage them
and to help them start afresh on their road to recovery

¹¹ Haslam, Oliver, *Refusing to Kill: Conscientious Objection and Human Rights in the First World War*, (Peace Pledge Union, 2006, revised 2014) p.52

however long or difficult it may be
and let me never lose faith in them or despair of them.

Eighth Station: Jesus speaks to the women and children

One of Amy Blake's distraught letters to her husband Harold, who was under arrest at Mill Hill Barracks, so upset him that he destroyed it. His reply survives.

My poor wife,

I received your letter last night and have had rather a restless night over it. Yesterday I felt that I was doing right, but now I am not sure. Perhaps my first consideration should have been to you my darling, and if that is so, I have made a ghastly and awful mistake. But it is too late to alter things now. Too late! If it were not too late I would give in and take my place in the RAMC yet I am convinced that that action would be wrong.

Oh! my darling, you can never understand the terrible fierceness of the temptation you hold out, when you ask 'for my sake'... I do not know how you are going to live either, but I had faith in the promise Jehovah jirah (The Lord will provide). Now everything is dark and I cannot see the way out. Oh! darling, forgive me if I have appeared to desert you, but you know I have acted from the highest motives. Just think! if this act were to remain in force, how would you like your children dragged from you and broken on the wheel of militarism? Yet that is what would happen, and for the sake of the unborn we must break the fetters, whatever the cost. You yourself have a great sacrifice to undertake for this great end. Probably your part is harder to play than mine, but let me be proud of my wife, and able to say to her children, 'Your mother bore her part bravely in the fight for your freedom'.

And now dear, I go to take the consequences of my action, but my confidence is shaken, and I pass from the outer world with vain regret, and a feeling of utter loneliness. Do not think hardly of me.

Yours in anguish, Harold ¹³

Corder Catchpool wrote to his mother, who was sewing items for use in hospitals:

I wish, however, that the members of every such sewing group had made it plain to their 'King and Country' that as women, as mothers, as Christians, they conceived their God-given mission in life was to upraise and cherish manhood, not strike down and destroy; and thus it was not for them to have any part in making or waging war... Be sure that if mothers had done this, the war would have been over by now.

Women of Europe! why have you left it to a handful of young men to make your protest for you? Women in khaki, who reviled us as we passed from office to office at the recruiting depot, God forgive you that you so misunderstood, not us, but your own womanhood. All honour to the women of Peace, and above all to those who, in the bitterness of their own sorrow, have kept a sweet spirit and held the faith—Mabel Dearmer, giving her life in the squalor of a Serbian Field Hospital, enunciating passionately the great truths of Peace— 'terrific things, like loving one's enemies' and her Geoffrey dead in France... Mrs Bridgewater slaving for 'enemy alien' wives and babes in

¹² ibid p.57

¹³ Goodall p.58

London, rather trying and touchy till it is found she has just lost another son at the Front. Mrs R. sending noble words of encouragement to me in prison, heartbroken for her boy who was infinitely dearer to her than life itself. Honour to these women, and to all like them whom I shall never know... ¹⁴

Prayer

Father,
all too often we are so taken up with our own problems and needs
that we fail to notice those of others.
Even in his sufferings and pain, stumbling on his way to Calvary,
Jesus was aware of the women and children who stood on the roadside
and spoke to them with compassion.
Help us, like Jesus, to put aside our own troubles and pains,
small as they are compared to his
and to be more aware of the needs of others and how we may help them
be it only with a kindly word or gesture.

Ninth Station: Jesus falls the third time

In Flanders Archibald Baxter from New Zealand was sentenced to 28 days' Field Punishment.

The slope of the post brought me into a hanging position, causing a large part of my weight to come on my arms, and I could get no proper grip with my feet on the ground, as it was worn away round the pole and my toes were consequently much lower than my heels. I was strained so tightly up against the post that I was unable to move body or limbs a fraction of an inch.

A few minutes after the sergeant had left me, I began to think of the length of my sentence and it rose up before me like a mountain. The pain grew steadily worse until by the end of half-an-hour it seemed absolutely unendurable. Between my set teeth I said: 'Oh God, this is too much. I can't bear it.' But I could not allow myself the relief of groaning as I did not want to give the guards the satisfaction of hearing me. The mental effect was almost as frightful as the physical. I felt I was going mad. That I should be stuck up on a pole suffering this frightful torture, a human scarecrow for men to stare at and wonder at, seemed part of some impossible nightmare that could not continue. At the very worst strength came to me and I knew I would not surrender. The battle was won, and though the suffering increased rather than decreased as the days wore on, I never had to fight it again. ¹⁵

Many, like Harold Steele, struggled at times to maintain their sanity

I was very young and inexperienced, feeling very 'strange' and disconcerted within my situation, and very, very often (I suspect) plain scared for the future. It was mostly very lonely in my prisons and overmuch No I Punishment Diet (bread and water only) in close solitary confinement in a below-ground, unheated cell with nothing whatever to pass the time can bring one very 'low' The pitiful thing above all, for those of us blessed with better health or greater strength, was to watch other comrades becoming ever weaker and weaker, and know surely (as probably they did,

¹⁴ Catchpool, T. Corder, *Letters of a Prisoners For Conscience Sake*, (George Allen & Unwin, 1941) p.41-42

¹⁵ Baxter, Archibald, *We Will Not Cease: the autobiography of a conscientious objector*, (First published 1939. Reprinted New Zealand, Cape Catley, 1983) p.106

too) that they were condemned to this miserable death... I had to watch many others going gradually 'potty' - indeed after Christmas 1918 I had a strenuous struggle to preserve my own ability to survive the equivalent of 'prison pallor', of the mind.¹⁶

Prayer

Father,
at this last fall, Jesus is at the end of his strength,
feeling, surely, that he can go no further.
Yet still he struggles to his feet and presses on to his death.
Help us never to give up
even when our faith is dim and all hope seems gone.
Give us strength to persevere to the very end
believing that you are with us every step of the way.

Tenth Station: Jesus is stripped of his garments

George Frederick Dutch, a Quaker, refused to put on a uniform.

The Major was very unpleasant, hectoring. He said, 'Well all I can say is that in my opinion conscientious objection is just another name for arrant cowardice.' He said, 'Take him away. Don't put a rag on him, he's got to dress himself.' And of course the NCOs did as they were told. I was taken back and they stripped me of my own clothing and put the uniform down beside me and said, 'Now you've got to put it on.' I said, 'Well I will not put it on.' They said, 'All right you've got to sit there.'

George was then left alone in his tent.

I sat there for a day or two and the whole camp was interested. Everybody knew what was going on. Soldiers used to come and say, 'Go on, stick it boy, stick it if it kills you.' The Major was very much disliked and I can understand that... Not only the officers, but the men didn't like him, and he must have noticed it because after a day or two suddenly my tent was taken up and taken right up on top of the cliff overlooking the sea. This was in November and it was pretty cold, misty weather. And I was taken up there and my uniform put beside me again by the tent pole and just to make things worse they rolled the tent walls up so that the wind came right into the tent, all round and I could sit there and freeze. Which I did. And the orders were that nobody was to come near me... Well I didn't dress and I didn't go down and I stayed there and I'm not quite sure how long it was, but I think it must have been at least ten days and nights in just my singlet and pants and socks. Just sitting like that in the tent, and before I'd been there many hours I was frozen right through with exposure, so that I didn't feel a lot, I was just insensitive.¹⁷

Prayer

Father,
Jesus was stripped of all human dignity
and exposed to ridicule by his torturers.
They failed to see that in this mangled and bloody body
was hidden your divine presence in our flesh.
Help us to see deeper and to recognise that you are present,

¹⁶ Steele handwritten memoir

¹⁷ Goodall p.14-15

though hidden from our sight
In every human person
but most especially in those who are ill used and dehumanised
and deprived of all human dignity.

Eleventh Station: Jesus is crucified

Refusing orders in France, Harry Stanton experienced the punishment known as 'crucifixion'.

Soon we were called out for our first experience of field punishment. Provision was made for this by means of a wooden framework, consisting of uprights 4 or 5 yards apart with connecting beams at a height of about 5 feet. We were placed with our backs to the posts, and arms outstretched. Our ankles were then tied together and our arms tied tightly at the wrists to the cross beams. We were to remain in this position for two hours. For those of us who were of average height the strain upon our arms was just bearable, though our wrists quickly became numbed, but for those who were shorter, the punishment was painful in the extreme, since they were forced to stand entirely on their toes in order to relieve their arms of the dead weight of the body.

[Later] Brewster and I found ourselves being taken off to quite another part of the camp. The prison was surrounded, not by a wall, but by a double barbed-wire fence, through which one could see, and be seen by everyone passing. We two were on this occasion placed with our faces to the wire of the inner fence, and tied in the usual manner at the wrists and ankles. As the ropes with which we were fastened were tied around barbed wire instead of the usual thick wooden posts, it was possible to tie them much more tightly, and I found myself drawn so closely into the fence that when I wished to turn my head I had to do so very slowly and cautiously to avoid my face being torn by the barbs. To make matters worse it came on to rain, and a cold wind blew straight across the top of the hill.

I did not feel however that we had any special grounds for complaint - we were exceptional cases, and militarism was making an effort to break down our resistance. What did seem to me shameful was that any voluntary soldier, who was offering his life in what he believed to be his country's service, was liable to such a punishment for quite a trivial offence, or at the instance of a prejudiced superior.¹⁸

Prayer

Father,
even in our day, countless women, men and even children
are brutally executed by evil regimes.
Help us to value every human life
and to cry out against all forms of state killing,
never forgetting that in each and every one of them
it is Jesus who is crucified yet again.

¹⁸ ibid p.23

Twelfth Station: Jesus dies on the cross

Walter Roberts died at Dyce [camp] on Friday...

I first met Walter Roberts on the eve of the hearing of his claim for exemption by the Local Tribunal at Bredbury. I was so attracted by his quiet strength and transparent sincerity that I decided to put off another engagement in order that I might be present at the proceedings. I believe Roberts was the first conscientious objector to appear before a tribunal...

The members of the Tribunal were aged and experienced men. Roberts looked younger than his twenty years. 'Are you not very youthful to hold such decided opinions?' the Chairman asked. 'I have been taught from my mother's knee that to hate and to kill is contrary to the teaching of Christ,' he answered with frank simplicity. The members of the Tribunal were dumbfounded. It was not so much the words which struck them; it was the serene and confident bearing of the young man which conquered them. They seemed conscious that they were in the presence of a Power and a Spirit greater than the things of this world.

In due course he was court-martialled and sentenced to four months imprisonment. He had nearly concluded his sentence when he was removed to Dyce. There he fell a victim to the wretched conditions of the camp, and died after an illness of five days. In his last letter to his mother, sent two days before his death, he said: *'As I anticipated, it has only been a question of time, for the damp conditions prevailing here to get the better of me. Bartle Wild is now writing to my dictation, as I am too weak to handle a pen myself. I don't want you to worry yourself because doctor says I have only got a severe chill, but it has reduced me very much. All the fellows here are exceedingly kind and are looking after me like bricks, so there is no reason why I should not be strong in a day or two, when I will write personally and more fully.'*

Fenner Brockway, writing in *The Tribunal* ¹⁹

Prayer

Father,
on the cross Jesus shared our doubts and fears to the bitter end.
At that last moment may we have faith and trust,
so that, like him, we may be able to commend ourselves in to your hands.
We remember the millions who die day by day in ways as terrible as the cross
and we pray that they too may find peace at the end.

Thirteenth Station: Jesus is taken down from the cross

Ralph Vipont Brown joined Friends War Victims Relief Service helping civilians in France. At the end of the war he chose to stay on until the university term started, but he died there in the flu epidemic of 1919, aged 20.

Saturday, June 1st 1918

¹⁹ Brockway *The Tribunal*, Sept 1916

We have shifted our headquarters further south & west to a place called Montmort. Here we set up a refuge. There are crowds of refugees pouring in. We helped them in and fed them & then packed them into military camions for Sézanne. I took our little bus round... picked up a sick woman & a child and then we took on an old couple who were struggling along the road with huge packs on their backs.

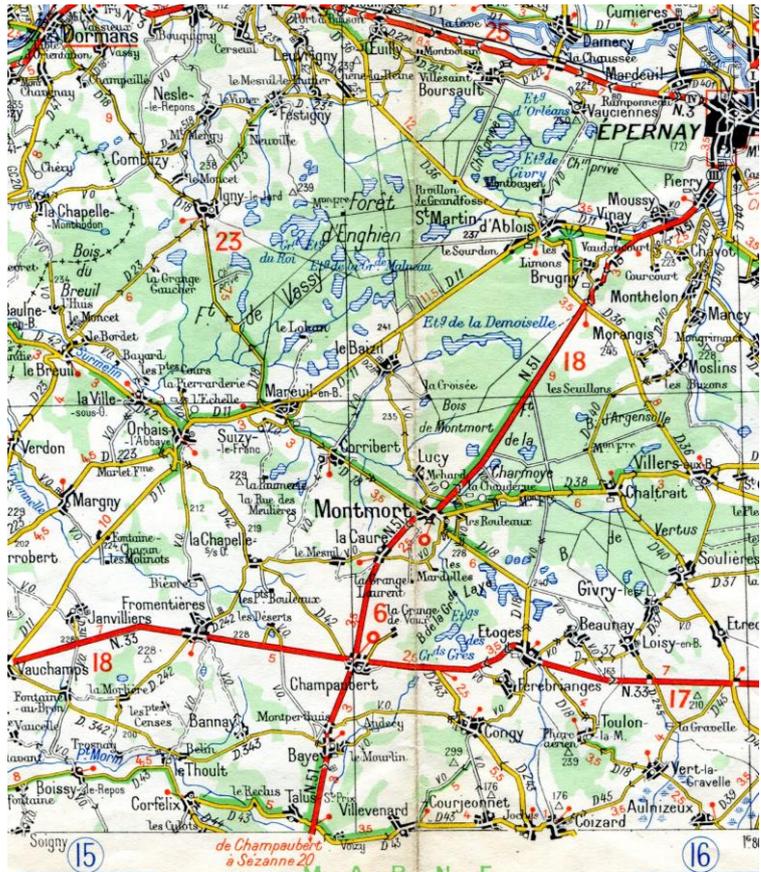
We brought them into Montmort and then set off again along the Dormans road to a little place called Festigny. Here we found lots of folk who wanted to come. There was one old lady ill in bed. We tried our utmost to persuade her to come away but she would rather die where she was, and die she will I think for the guns are going something cruel.

We picked up one old woman who was hysterical with the shock and another who was helpless and cried out every time we touched her. We also had a couple of old men on board and their baggage. Also we picked up an old woman on the road, and brought the lot back to Montmort. I then had a run to Fèrebrianges to take a stretcher case. It was an old man of 83 and very ill at that, also I had two old women on board and another man and piles of baggage. We took them to their relatives and got the old man safely put to bed with the help of some British soldiers who were very kind.

We spent the night at Montmort in the car. The other cars went up at night and evacuated the rest of Festigny. This really is the saddest business I was ever in in my life. One gets into close contact with the people. They seemed stunned and hopeless. They have lost everything and haven't any pluck left. They're just stunned. It's great to be able to help them but we can do awfully little really.²⁰

Prayer

Father, we can only imagine the desolation and sadness that must have overwhelmed those who took Jesus' body from the cross. We remember those whose bodies lie scattered on battlefields and in places turned in to rubble by bombs and shells or who have died in refugee camps or from famine or disease where there often is no-one to give them a decent burial. For them we weep with you, Father, for in each of them we see the body of your Son, taken down, mangled and bloody from his cross.



²⁰ Vipont-Brown, unpublished diary

Fourteenth Station: Jesus is laid in the tomb

Henry Firth's was the only funeral from Dartmoor and the whole of the men attended the funeral. They insisted; they couldn't have prevented them and they followed behind the coffin down to the railway and it was put on the little train at Princetown and taken down to Plymouth, that's the little railway that winds, single line along the moor, you can see it for miles on its way to Plymouth which is about 10 miles away.

And we went to the station and it was all arranged by our own people; we didn't allow the prison authority to do anything except what they had to do, and some of the COs got hold of some fog signals and they put them on the line here and there. As the train went out of the little station at Princeton these went off, a sort of farewell. And I remember nearly a thousand men sang a hymn, 'Abide With Me'.²¹

Prayer

Father, as the stone closed over the door of the tomb,
those who loved Jesus must have felt what we feel
as the earth is cast in to the grave
or the crematorium curtains close
and the one whom we loved seems to be no more.
We pray for all those who feel this pain and loneliness
that they may not be alone
but like those who left Jesus' tomb,
find support and comfort from one another
in the love that they share with the one whom they have bidden farewell.

Final Prayer

Father, As we have followed Jesus on his painful journey to Calvary
we have been inspired by the words of those who have also walked that way
facing punishment and even death rather than deny Jesus' teaching
that we must love one another
and be ready to refuse all violence towards those who are our brothers and sisters.
Give us the same courage to live the Gospel teaching in our lives.
Help us build a world where warfare and violence are no more
and our conflicts and differences are solved not by taking up arms
but by seeking ways and means of listening to one another,
understanding each other's point of view
and solving our differences together.
We ask this in the name of him who came to share our life and our death
Jesus, who has shown us the way of love
which alone leads us to justice and to peace.
Amen.

²¹ Goodall p.52-53

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The Way of the Cross with reflections drawn from the First World War Conscientious Objectors

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