



Book review

Bob Holman, Woodbine Willie. An Unsung Hero of World War One,
Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2013, pp.222, £9.99. ISBN 978-0-7459-5561-2

Bob Holman has written a reflective and not uncritical exploration of the life of the Revd Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy M.C. ('Woodbine Willie') 1883-1929; Anglican priest, World War One chaplain, and for the last eight years of his life, a messenger and speaker for the Industrial Christian Fellowship (ICF).

There is a Boy's Own 'Victorian hero' feel about the life that unfolds, although this does not encapsulate the truth and challenge of Studdert Kennedy's life and ministry. He was a man of courage and outspoken integrity, publicly acclaimed as a selfless pastor, fearless prophet, and inspiring preacher.

It is impossible not to be inspired and challenged by the life of this imitator of Christ, as Bob Holman clearly is. But the author does not varnish over nor airbrush out the flaws in some of Studdert Kennedy's writings nor the effect on family life of a man whose ministry was given to and for others, despite his recurring bouts of asthma. Holman notes that despite his popularity as a speaker and preacher Studdert Kennedy rarely believed that he was in any way successful, and in fact believed that the most important aspect of his life was to follow Christ.

During the war he was awarded the Military Cross for risking his own life in obtaining morphine for soldiers in pain, whilst under fire in the trenches. But his popularity and relevance as a chaplain owed far more to his genuine concern for the soldiers, sharing their experiences of trench warfare, and communicating with them in a language that they understood, not to mention his distribution of cigarettes to the men as they went over the top – hence his nickname 'Woodbine Willie'. Holman comments:

More than any other chaplain, he was prepared publicly to raise the questions which men were asking: Why does God allow war? How can a God of love ignore human suffering? What is the use of the church out here? He attempted to answer them and did not avoid the basic question: Does God even exist? (page 73)

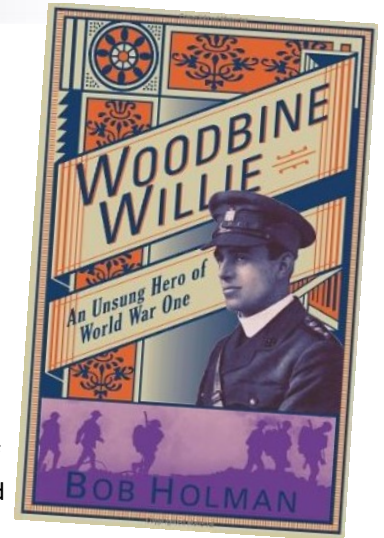
Holman notes that in his book *Rough Talks* by a Padre Studdert Kennedy maintains that

Just as a mother suffers when a son or daughter experiences suffering, so does God in Christ suffer when one of his creatures is in agony. It is just because Christ understands and feels pain that he is able to be alongside his followers through their terrible experiences. The suffering Christ becomes the ever-present Christ. (page 75)

When Studdert Kennedy saw the bleeding and broken bodies of fallen soldiers he saw the body and blood of Christ, believing that the sacrifices of men represented the sacrifice of God, who loved them, and that as such their deaths should be remembered at communion services. He also maintained that real prayer, following the pattern of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, was not for safety but courage to do God's will.

Much of this thinking is summed up in Studdert Kennedy's address at the unveiling of a war memorial crucifix outside St Paul's church in Worcester in 1921, which Holman quotes in full, and includes this passage:

The Christ [on this cross] has His head held erect. He was not beaten, broken or defeated. They took His body and broke it, and hung it between earth and sky, but His Spirit was unbroken and so was the spirit of your brothers and fathers who died unbroken and unbeaten. Tell your children that the crucifix means the victory of good over evil. I could not bring myself to have a Calvary made where Christ looked broken and dead. (page 86-7)



Here we have the Christ, as portrayed in John's Gospel, in whose death God is glorified (John 12:23-24) and whose final declaration from the cross is a triumphal conclusion to his ministry: 'It is finished!' (John 19:30). For Studdert Kennedy the cross does not have Christ hanging in despair but expectancy, and for him this formed the core of a Gospel of hope and justice.

Studdert Kennedy was concerned about poverty, local and worldwide, the value and worth of women and children, sexual equality, and a fairer world and society. Holman maintains that Studdert Kennedy was a social evangelist, who while rejoicing in conversions to the faith, had a wider content to his evangelism. He gave prominence to how Christianity should be lived, the welcoming of working class people into churches, the practice of proper sexual relationships, the ethics used by employers and employees, the relief of unemployment and poverty, and the condemnation of war. The whole gospel for Studdert Kennedy consisted of how people should relate to God and to society.

In the autumn of 1921 he was appointed a messenger for ICF, a role he continued to fulfil until his death in 1929. Studdert Kennedy's engagement with ICF and his desire to see Christians practise their faith in the work setting is summed up in his challenge:

If finding God in our churches leads to us losing Him in our factories, then better we tear down those churches, for God must hate the sight of them. (page 110)

In the context of the General Strike of 1926 and the forthcoming economic collapse of 1929 Studdert Kennedy wanted a fairer Britain, but not one in which the differences of wealth and income completely disappeared. With ICF he favoured moderate rather than militant tactics, and a church that was more outspoken on political issues. He saw Christianity as a solution to social problems and believed that Christianity would make people in industry more committed to cooperation than conflict at work and more ready to promote a socially just society. Holman notes that he was never a supporter of Socialism and criticised the adversarial, class war approach of socialists. He was nevertheless a radical, but one who did not fit into any political party. His radical way was that of Jesus; a personal relationship with God, which led to a life lived for others in shaping a transformed society. God was in Christ redeeming the world by his suffering, and following the suffering and resurrected Christ was the only hope of social regeneration and the Christianisation of economic life.

When seeking to sum up his ministry, Studdert Kennedy's contemporaries use the words 'love' and 'humility', and saw him as an advocate of peace. A man who attracted crowds wherever he spoke, filling churches and community halls with 1000s of people, but who spent the greater part of his ministry in poor parishes on a low stipend, even giving away to charity any additional income that came his way. When he died a public collection was made to provide money to support his widow and three children.

Holman writes:

if we judge him by Christ's standards, then he is a success, for his humility, his love of family, his identification with those he wanted to serve, his capacity for friendships, his rejection of riches and power, his willingness to serve others, are all a reflection of Christ. (page 177)

A life well-lived and a book that is an inspiring and yet poignant account, which will encourage the reader of this biography to seek out and examine some of the books, including his poems, that Studdert Kennedy wrote as he reflected upon Christian discipleship, war and peace, life and work, and socialism and capitalism.

Rowan Williams gave a clear assessment of the foundation of his belief on Remembrance Sunday 2009:

In all his work, in his sermons, his meditations, his astonishing poems, so many of them cast in the voice of the ordinary soldier in the trenches full of protest and apparent blasphemy, Studdert Kennedy argues against the bland problem-solving God. His commitment is to the God who is discovered in the heart of your own endurance and pain - not a solution, not a Father Christmas or fairy Godmother, but simply the one who holds your deeper self and makes it possible for you to look out on the world without loathing and despair. (page 180)

This God is not the God of comfortable Christianity but the God who enters the dark places of social deprivation and injustice and seeks to transform them.

Studdert Kennedy lived the life, that is, his actions and words were those of the Christ he served. We would say that he didn't only 'talk the talk' he also 'walked the walk!'

Holman presents a man of his time, set in the context of inner-city poverty, war, and an impoverished post-war society. Yet he is seen as ahead of his time, and the challenge of his Christian walk is as relevant today as it was in the 1920s.