

1Kings 17: *the widow made a little scone* Ps 145: *my soul, give praise to the Lord* Heb 9: *Christ offers Himself to take on the faults of many*
Mk 12:38–44: *the poor widow has put in more than all.*

On this centenary of the Armistice that silenced the guns and brought World War I to its close, it is right that we commemorate the dead of that, and subsequent wars. Personally I have few members of my family who have fought in armed conflict. My mother's grandfather fought in the Boer War; and her uncle fought in World War I — he survived, but his lungs were affected and he died in his late 40s. But neither of my grandfathers fought at the front in either of the World Wars — one was, in fact, building aircraft at the famous De Havilland site in Hatfield, which would come under regular bomb attack. Some of you, however, will have quite close relatives who died in armed conflict, whether fighting in the British Army, or elsewhere. Over 10% of the 6 million soldiers from this country from this country who were mobilized were killed, which is why every single town and village in this country has its war memorial. World War I is etched onto our national memory, even 100yrs on, but for many of us now the sheer scale of the conflict — the numbers of dead and wounded, totalling about 38 million — is hard to comprehend. We honour those who gave their lives for their country, yes — and we pray for those war dead — but we pause too to take in the devastation that war inflicts, and are reminded of the awful sorrows that it causes families and societies.

The Gospel account of Our Lord's admiration for the poor widow who gave all she had can very much put us in mind of the ultimate sacrifice. Many women came out of World War I as widows — or had lost sons and grandsons, brothers and others. And many of them would then have struggled, bringing up families on low incomes and without the presence of those men whose lives had been lost fighting at the front. But the lesson, surely, of the widow in the Gospel, is that even in the midst of such affliction, can come such expressions of love and faith. The widow that Jesus sees in Jerusalem at the Temple is giving her last pennies to contribute to the sacrifices and offerings to God, the prayerful service done in God's name. Likewise, even in the horrors of war, can come moments of realisation, or conversion, acts of great love and sacrifice for others, selfless giving and caring. Sometimes, the very frailty of life, its

precariousness, comes more to the fore in times of war. Nothing can be relied on, then, not even the continuation of one's life, and this often focusses the mind to the things that do last beyond the uncertainties of earthly life: the things of God, our preparation for heaven, as against the passing nature of earthly possessions.

Back in 1915 — only a year into the Great War — the *Catholic Truth Society* published a pamphlet pulling together various accounts of divine intervention in people's lives in the face of the unfolding tragedy of war. Dozens of stories of faith-filled heroism can be found in the pages of that CTS pamphlet, any one of them which might give us an insight into how the Catholics of 100yrs ago coped with the horrors of this inhumanity unfolding in the trenches of the western front. I chose just one to read to you this morning ...

An Officer's Conversion.

On the evening of the Feast of All Saints, 1914, a young officer called at a convent in Westminster and asked for instruction. This was his story. He came of a Protestant family but he had one Catholic friend who had spoken to him of the Catholic religion as

the only religion to die in. He was up in London for the day and was to rejoin his regiment that night. They were to go to the front two days later. He had, he said, a presentiment that he should never return, and he had made up his mind to become a Catholic. He had no notion how to set about it, but finding that a man working in the place where he stayed in town was a Catholic, F. asked his advice, and was taken by him to the convent. On the way—so sure was he of his intentions—he erased "Church of England" from his identification disc and scratched "R.C." beside it. When he arrived at the convent it was already six o'clock, and his train left at 8.30, so Sister N., hearing his story, took him at once to a priest at Westminster Cathedral, who instructed him, prepared him for confession, and gave him conditional baptism. "Thank God," said F., when the ceremony was over, "now if I'm hit I can call a priest." That night he told his fellow-officers of his reception into the Church, and for the next two days he had to stand a good deal of chaff; for he had never been considered a serious-minded man, and this apparently sudden turn to religion in a boy of twenty-one bewildered his friends.

On November 4th he went to the front, and we have no record of his first weeks of Catholic life. From December 3rd we have his diary. Here are extracts from the entries:—

"December 4th. Go to Confession, Holy Communion [this was his first Communion] and Mass in morning."

"December 10th. Usual parade in morning. Feeling very fed-up and unhappy, don't know why. Parade 7.30 to go back."

There is no entry for the 11th. On the 12th he lifted his head above the trench and was shot through the brain by a sniper. Death was instantaneous. Some days later the following letter, marked "To be sent after death," reached his friend. It was written on December 3rd, the day before his first Communion.

"I have been talking to a R.C. priest and I feel much the better

for it. If you ever get this you will know I am gone to a better place. Live a pious life and if I have gone to the right place you will join me later on. It is very hard to write a letter that won't be delivered till after you're gone. Good-bye and God bless you and keep you.—F."