



Editorial



Tony Graham

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Later this year we will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armistice treaty signed by the Allies and Germany at Compiègne, France that ended the World War One. The truce went into effect at the eleventh hour on 11 November 1918. On that first Armistice Day, as the bells rang out and people celebrated the end of the conflict, parents in Monkmoor Road, Shrewsbury, received news of their first son's death. Wilfred Owen had been fatally wounded in action while attempting to lead his men across the Sambre canal at Ors a week before the signing of the Armistice.

Owen was one of the finest poets of the World War One. He did not depict the war in a sentimental way, as some noble undertaking but instead his aim was to tell the truth about his experiences on the Western Front – the horror and brutality of modern industrial warfare, the suffering it brings and a warning about what men were doing to each other.

In 'Strange Meeting', which Owen wrote in the spring or early summer of 1918, two soldiers who fought on opposing sides meet in an imagined Hell. One has killed the other, but despite the fact they were enemies, there is no animosity on the part of the man who died lifts 'distressful hands, as if to bless' his killer. 'I am the enemy you killed, my friend'. No longer enemies, they find it possible to see beyond conflict and hatred and be reconciled to one another. This is the clear message of the poem – humankind must seek reconciliation. However, Owen also expresses the fear that enemies will not be reconciled, that 'Men will go

content with what we spoiled' and not have learnt the truth about the 'pity of war'.

Owen's warning about the need for reconciliation was not heeded. Although the guns finally fell silent in 1918 and the war did not officially end until the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28th June 1919, peace would not last. The eleventh hour would mark a pause, not the end.

After the Great War, Irène Laure, who lived in southern France, worked with her husband, Victor, to rebuild relationships with Germans, even taking German children into their home. However, when the Nazis invaded France two decades later, they both became active members of the French Resistance in the Marseilles region. Irène Laure was a socialist and she hated what the Germans were doing to her country and her family (one of her sons was arrested and tortured by the Gestapo). She rejoiced when she saw Allied bombers flying overhead and wanted to see Germany obliterated from the map of Europe. After the war she witnessed the opening of a mass grave of some of her comrades in the Resistance.

In 1946 Laure was elected to the French National Assembly from Marseilles with a huge majority. This was the first election in France when women were allowed to vote or stand for parliament. Keen to participate in the rebuilding of Europe after the war, Laure accepted an invitation to attend the Moral Re-Armament (MRA) Conference at Caux, Switzerland, in July 1947. However, when she arrived Laure discovered that there were also Germans attending the conference, they

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1. For a more detailed account see M Henderson, *Forgiveness: Breaking the Chain of Hate* (London: Grosvenor, 2002), pp. 145–150. See also J Piquet, *For the Love of Tomorrow: Irene Laure Story* (Initiatives of Change, 1987).

2. See M Volf's excellent book, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

3. D Goodhart, 'The age of incivility: how social media amplifies our differences', *The Spectator*, 9 June 2018.

were the first Germans to be authorised by the Allied Occupation to leave their country. Laure immediately felt that she could not stay, such were her feelings of hatred. However, before she got to the door she was challenged by American pastor, Frank Buchman, with the question, 'How can you expect to rebuild Europe if you reject the German people?' It was a probing question that went straight to the heart of the matter and sent Laure into turmoil. She retired to her room and spent two days and nights without food or sleep wrestling with her conscience and, it turns out, with God. She recognised that she had to deal with her hatred. 'I needed a miracle,' she said. 'I hardly believed in God, but he performed that miracle.'

On the third morning Laure left her room and agreed to meet and have a meal with just one German lady, the widowed Clarita von Trott, who was a part of the Resistance in Germany. Through this conversation Laure understood how the war devastated both their countries and realized that her hatred was misplaced. After the meal the two women prayed together, seeking God's help to overcome the hatred so that they could build a new future.

Laure then asked to be allowed to speak to the conference, including the Germans. She stood in front of the 600 delegates admitting how she felt about the German people. She admitted that her feelings were wrong and asked for the forgiveness of all Germans present. There was silence and then a German woman rose and took Laure's hand. For Laure, it was as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders and she knew from that moment she would give the rest of her life's work for forgiveness and reconciliation.

In 1949 Laure and her husband travelled throughout Germany addressing 200 meetings, including ten state parliaments. Every time Laure repeated her apology and asked for forgiveness. Her words reached tens of thousands of Germans and she became something of a catalyst for a wider Franco-German reconciliation movement.

Laure died in 1987. The heading of her obituary in *The Times* referred to her as a 'healer of wounds'. For Laure, reconciliation became a way of life, a journey away from hatred towards forgiveness and friendship, a movement from exclusion to embrace.²

At the heart of Laure's commitment to be a peacemaker, was her faith in God. It was by God's grace that Laure's wounds of hatred and suffering were transformed and became a source of healing. In her work, Laure was able to help people create spaces where they could tell their stories but also listen to another's point of view and be changed by the encounter.

In many ways, Irène Laure's is a remarkable and challenging story. Like Laure, we too are called to be peacemakers in a fractured world, both individually and as the Church, and be witnesses of the gospel

of hope. Two of our contributors, Sarah Hills and Gordon Kennedy, remind us that this ministry of reconciliation begins with the transforming grace of God, the wounded healer. As Gordon states, 'if we long to see reconciliation in our relationships with one another we must begin with our reconciliation to God our Father.'

Our need for God's grace is highlighted in Fleur Dorrell's reflections on Caravaggio's two paintings of the *Supper at Emmaus* based on the story in Luke's Gospel. Here Fleur explores 'how Caravaggio uses symbol and revelation to reconcile art with reality and faith with salvation to open the disciples' eyes to Christ'.

Our second article comes out of the Corrymeela community in Northern Ireland. Established in 1965, Corrymeela's mission is to 'transform division through human encounter'. Here Glenn Jordan and Pádraig Ó Tuama discuss, with a focus on the book of Ruth, the importance of creating space to share stories and the power narratives have to confront and transform. As we approach the centenary of the partition of Ireland and face the uncertainty of the UK leaving the European Union, Glenn and Pádraig challenge us to examine 'the stories that will affect our civic, bordered, political, religious and relational realities. These realities invite deep and complicated reflection on the past, and the ways in which the stories told (or not told) of the past can affect the practice of the present.' What sort of society do we want to become?

As technology drives changes in society, significant interpersonal challenges emerge. As David Goodhart argues, social media has amplified our differences and the tone has changed.³ We are living in an age of increasing incivility. So how do we deal with difference and what practical steps can we take to help restore broken relationships? Drawing on her own experience of social media, Elizabeth Oldfield reflects on what it means to love your neighbour in a digital age.

Social divisions are not new, as David Muir outlines in his account of the Windrush generation, who experienced significant racism and discrimination. 'The Church can, and should be, the place where all people feel welcome and accepted.' However, more needs to be done to make our churches more inclusive and our society more cohesive.

In our penultimate article, we return to the subject of war – our war on nature. Ian Christie argues that in the face of a worsening ecological crisis we need to urgently rethink our ethics and values. The potential for ecological reconciliation is real and Christian communities can take a lead and be 'exemplars of new ways of living and cooperating that demonstrate reconciliation' with God's creation.

This collection of articles challenges us to think about how we live and the sort of society we want to live in. Blessed, indeed, are the peacemakers.