

A Lenten poem by Rev G A Studdert-Kennedy

Written by Patrick Comerford

My choice of Lenten poem today is 'Indifference', or 'When Jesus came to Birmingham,' written by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy while he was a chaplain during World War I. 'Woodbine Willie' felt God's heartbeat for people and ministered faithfully, through practical love and through his poetry, to the ordinary soldiers living through 'hell on earth' in the trenches.

In his poem, Kennedy compares the behaviour of Christ's contemporaries with our behaviour today towards the stranger and the outcast, and challenges us in Lent to consider whether we are following Christ to Golgotha.

When Jesus Came to Birmingham

*When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.*

*When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed Him by.
They would not hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.*

*Still Jesus cried, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do, '
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched Him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall, and cried for Calvary.*

G. A. Studdert-Kennedy

Kennedy once wrote: "We have taught our people to use prayer too much as a means of comfort – not in the original and heroic sense of uplifting, inspiring, strengthening, but in the more modern and baser sense of soothing sorrow, dulling pain, and drying tears – the comfort of the cushion, not the comfort of the Cross."



Woodbine Willie, Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy (1883-1929), was an Anglican priest-poet with an Irish background. He was given his nickname 'Woodbine Willie' during World War I because of his reputation for giving Woodbine cigarettes along with pastoral and spiritual support to injured and dying soldiers.

He was born in Leeds in 1883, the seventh of nine children born to Jeanette Anketell and William Studdert Kennedy, a vicar in Leeds. He was educated at Leeds Grammar School and then went to Trinity College Dublin, where he received his degree in classics and divinity in 1904.

After a year's training for ordination, he was appointed a curate in Rugby. In 1914, he was appointed Vicar of Saint Paul's in Worcester.

On the outbreak of World War I, Kennedy volunteered as a chaplain in the British Army on the Western Front, and it was there he was given the nickname 'Woodbine Willie.'

During the war, he was attached to a bayonet-training service, and toured with boxers and wrestlers to give morale-boosting speeches about the usefulness of the bayonet. In 1917, he ran into 'No Man's Land' at the Messines Ridge, to help the wounded during an attack on the German frontline. For his bravery, he was decorated with the Military Cross.

His poems about his war-time experiences were published in *Rough Rhymes of a Padre* (1918), and *More Rough Rhymes* (1919).