

**Sermon Notes Sunday 11 November 2018**  
**Remembrance Sunday/Pentecost 25B**  
**St Paul's Byron Bay**

29 December

I quote from a letter dated 1917:

*Dear Mrs Beechey*

*I am very sorry to have to tell you your son Leonard died here this morning of the effects of his wounds. He was unfortunately far from well at the time he was hit; tetanus set in about ten days ago and he got gradually worse. He had Holy Communion on Christmas Day and once before while he was here. He is to be buried at St Sever Cemetery, Rouen, tomorrow. May God bless and comfort you and grant him rest.*

*Yours very truly, Stanley Hide*

*Church of England Chaplain*

Mrs Amy Beechey was no doubt stricken with grief at this news. Her son Leonard, aged 36, had been born at Pinchbeck, Lincolnshire, UK in 1881. Pinchbeck was the parish of which I was Vicar when I served in the Church of England and that's where I came across this family's story. Leonard's father, Rev'd Beechey, was assistant curate at Pinchbeck in the 1870s and 80s.

Amy and Prince Beechey had 14 children altogether, 8 of whom were boys. Can you imagine 14 children – including 8 boys in one family? Not that uncommon in those days I suppose. Many of the 14 children were born in Pinchbeck during Rev'd Beechey's time there as assistant curate. Amy & Prince Beechey were fortunate to have lost only one of their 14 children in infancy – the other 13 lived to adulthood.

Len was a Rifleman with the 18<sup>th</sup> London Irish Rifles and was wounded in the Bourslon Wood, advancing on the Hindenburg Line between the Canal du Lord and the St Quentin Canal, in late November 1917.

His mother's grief at the news of his death was all the deeper due to the fact that she had already lost 4 sons: Barnard; Frank; Harold & Charles who had all died in World War 1. So the loss of five sons was an incredible sacrifice for one family to bear. In fact, all 8 Beechey boys served in World War 1, and only 3 returned.

This is difficult for us to conceive today in an era of small families and of relative peace, but it drives home to us the scale of loss in the Great War and the associated enormous scale of grief, broken dreams and lost futures. The lives of 5 young healthy men from one family, all lost.

As a newspaper columnist wrote at the time, "*the countless numbers of heroic sacrifices made by British mothers have been eclipsed by Mrs Beechey who has given 8 sons to serve their country, 5 of whom have been slain*".

I read about the sad stories of the Beechey boys in a book "Brothers in War" by Michael Walsh – a good read and most informative.

One of the positives of World War 1 – and also I think World War 2 – was that the church was able to play an important role in helping people with their grief. Society then was very different to today; the church still held a position of respect within society.

Today, in what we call the post-Christendom era, the church, together with many other institutions that were once held in high regard, is now at the fringe and looked upon (in a best case scenario) with goodwill and (in a worst case scenario) with suspicion or contempt.

It is perhaps from this perspective, of suspicion or even contempt, that some commentators see the widow's action in chapter 12:38-44 of today's Gospel.

The Temple Treasury was where donors had to declare the amount of their gift and the purpose for which it was intended with everything being visible and audible through the open door.

The widow's offering was a "lepta" (a term used in late Greek for the smallest coin in circulation).

So this is a story of a widow being impoverished by her obligations to the temple as an institution. Seen in this way the story is a lament. The woman (though faithful to God) has little or no respect for the religious institution of the temple.

Jesus recognises this and uses it as a teaching opportunity for the disciples, who he calls to him and says: "*They all gave from their abundance – she, in her destitution, gave everything she had....her whole life*".

These days, people who have little or no respect or time for the church don't *have* to come and pay homage. They have plenty of other "gods" they can worship...

Yet I believe they still have many of the same *questions and concerns*. They face the same life problems as those earlier generations who did have the support and fellowship of the church.

Today, many rely on Google to provide answers to some of life's biggest questions. Google, for many, is more than just a search engine. It is like a friend, confidant or even a confessor. Some of the most common searches of course are things like:

"coffee shops near me"

"where is my phone?"

"what time is it?"

"what time is it in London?"

Maybe we can all relate to these ones!

Beyond that, some of the most common questions asked of Google are these:

Who is Jesus?

Is God real?

What is the meaning of life?

Further down the list: how to pray? What happens when you die?

On the one hand, it is encouraging to know that people still ask questions like this. On the other, frustrating because we can help them explore these questions and other questions like them. But how do we get them to trust? How do we get them to come?

Although I am a Bishop now, it should be no surprise I don't have the answer to that!

The only answer I have is to focus on *building community*.

A community of trust; inclusiveness; transparency; welcome....

with a variety of expressions so that all might feel able to find a place.

So I affirm what you're doing here:

- exploring new ways of being the church;
- engaging with the questions people have and building community by sharing God's unconditional love.

Later today we'll gather around the bell in its new housing.

Bells were first introduced to call people to church. While they mightn't produce that result any more, bells will always (hopefully) sound a call that will make us all stop and think and give thanks.