

Edith Cavell

Today the Church of England commemorates no fewer than three holy men and women: the seventh century Bishop of York Wilfrid of Ripon, the nineteenth century prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, and the nurse Edith Cavell. Given the centenary this year of the ending of the First World War it is very appropriate that we should be reflecting on the last of these, Edith Cavell.

Edith was born into a clergy family in 1865. She started work as a governess but then trained as a nurse, finally in 1903 working with the Red Cross in Belgium. With the outbreak of the First World War she cared for the wounded on both sides of the conflict, allied and German. Despite the obvious dangers when Belgium was occupied by the Germans she refused to be sent back home and instead smuggled British soldiers into Holland.

In 1915 she was arrested by the Germans and brought to trial. She sought to protect those who worked with her, but she herself was sentenced to death and executed by firing squad on 12th October 1915. It is reported that she went to her death calmly, forgiving her executioners, convinced that she had been doing her duty as a Christian.

On the night before her execution she said to the Anglican chaplain who was allowed to see her and give her Communion: "Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone." Those words are inscribed on her statue in St Martin's Place near Trafalgar Square in London. Her remains were returned to this country after the war and she was buried in the grounds of Norwich Cathedral.

Her legacy is significant. In her lifetime she was already regarded as a pioneer of modern nursing. But she is celebrated by the Church for her deep and practical faith, for her care for all whoever they were, for her lack of bitterness and for her readiness to forgive.

Our Bible reading just now (Matthew 25.31-40) is particularly fitting for people like Edith Cavell. "I was sick and you cared for me", says Jesus, and then, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me".

Edith sought no reward. She showed no partiality. She saw the wounded on both sides as committed to her care, as her family. And that is a great lesson for all of us: to see others as God sees them, to see others as children of God, as fellow human beings. Edith reminds us of our call to serve, to heal wounds, to show forgiveness, compassion and love. And so we give thanks for her inspiring example.

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