

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> July 2016, 9<sup>th</sup> after Trinity. Commemoration of the Somme.**

**St Mark 10:32**      *They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed and those who followed were afraid.*

All our readings this morning have some connection with Alick Young-Herries, who had more than a passing acquaintance with the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We know that from a poignant memoir produced after his death by the local parish minister, David Frew, the minister of the parish of Urr in which Spottes House is situated, the Kirkcudbrightshire home of the Herries family, now as then. In those days the family's townhouse was in Edinburgh's Heriot Row, hence the grave here in Canongate Kirkyard where Alick's mother and grandfather were buried. He himself lies in one of the immaculately tended cemeteries of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Northern France where the family I understand has also been represented this weekend. But it is the plaque on the wall of the family grave here, quoted on the front of today's service sheet, that gives us our connection with him and our opportunity today to honour him 100 years after his death, and in honouring him honouring also those amongst whom he served and died in the Battle of the Somme. The minister's memoir, entitled "A Young Borderer", suggests that his short life was typical of his generation and class – prep school followed by Eton and Cambridge - and describes halcyon days of cricket and rowing and sketching. Church-going and faith played an important part in his life too, not just at Eton and Cambridge but in the considerably less rarified surroundings of the trenches of the Western Front, where familiar texts would come back to his mind not least at times of danger and difficulty.

Psalm 104 – *I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being* - was one of his favourites, and with all its references to creation ideally suited to his early artistic efforts at illustration. St Paul's Letter to the Philippians meant a lot to him from an early stage too, inspiring him latterly to keep going through those dark and dangerous days. *Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.* But the Gospel reading and the text for the sermon, from St Mark's Gospel, is my choice, deliberately chosen to reflect the risks that Alick Young Herries and so many other young infantry officers like him took and the price they paid for much of the duration of the First World War. In his history entitled *The British Officer*, Antony Clayton (sometime Senior Lecturer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst) writes "The nature of the infantry officer's duties exposing them to the greatest danger meant that they suffered proportionately the highest casualty rates in the Army. In 1916-17 it was estimated that the average life expectancy of a newly joined Subaltern in the front line was, at best, one month". Having followed in his father's footsteps and deployed to France with the Kings Own Scottish Borderers in August 1914, perhaps the wonder is not that Alick died so young, but that he lived so long. Young infantry officers had such a short life expectancy because they led literally from the front, they were the first to lead their men up out of the trenches and over the top whenever the whistle blew the advance, they were the first through the barbed wire into No Man's Land and always armed only with a revolver. They would want to set a good example to the soldiers under their command, an example of courage and calm at least on the face of it and in doing so many of them were cruelly cut down in their prime. Eton alone lost 1157 former pupils like Alick Young Herries.

*They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed and those who followed were afraid.* It's a scene that's easy to picture from

different perspectives, but today it portrays Jesus for all the world like a platoon commander, leading his troops from the front, striding out ahead of them and putting himself at considerable risk there on the road, going up to Jerusalem. Given that Jesus is only too aware of precisely what lies ahead for him, it is a picture of courage and calm too, whilst his foot soldiers are more predictably anxious, understandably amazed and afraid. Especially when he takes them aside and shares with them every last detail of the grim trial that awaits him. “The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” No wonder they were amazed. No wonder they were afraid. *They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed and those who followed were afraid.*

There are echoes in our own text of Alick Herries’ favourite text from St Paul’s Letter to the Phillipians. “*This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*” For Alick Herries, that call came at first light on a Sunday morning, the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1916, and it was in the evening of the following day that he was buried, on 24<sup>th</sup> July. The burial was led by his friend and battalion padre, the Revd J K Cameron, a minister of the Church of Scotland, who in a letter to Alick’s father himself painted something of a picture of the all too familiar scene. “A tract of country in which our foe three weeks ago regarded himself as secure; the main road cutting across a plateau; on the right hand side the battalion resting; on the left an Advanced Dressing Station, and near it on the side of the road a line of graves – graves almost touched by the folds of the flag with its blood-red cross; three sides of the plateau, a valley black with the smoke of bursting shrapnel; a group of officers; the chaplain; the burial service, the words of Holy Scripture, the sentences of the offered prayer, punctuated by the throb of the guns of the foe, and the roar of Britain’s answering cannon; then, through the din, the wail of the pibroch: a last look, a last salute, and back to duty, leaving a soldier, who had died a soldier’s death, sleeping in a soldier’s grave till Reveille on the Resurrection Morning.”

*Jesus said I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*

*They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed and those who followed were afraid.*

O Lord, without whom our labour is but lost and all our watching is in vain, grant that the King’s Own Scottish Borderers may ever trust in thy true religion, and endure hardness as good soldiers of him who bore the cross, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.