

Film Review – John Weaver

Woodbine Willie

Revd Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy MC

featuring David Robinson as WWI padre

DVD produced for the Industrial Christian Fellowship by Old Piano Films, 2014. Running time 30 minutes, £5 plus p&p (£3)
Available from Mrs Ann Wright, P O Box 414, HORLEY, RH6 8WL

The Revd Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy M.C. ('Woodbine Willie') 1883–1929 was an Anglican priest, World War One chaplain, and for the last eight years of his life, a messenger and speaker for the Industrial Christian Fellowship (ICF). In the autumn of 1921 he was appointed a messenger for ICF, a role he continued to fulfil until his death in 1929. Studdert Kennedy's engagement with ICF and his desire to see Christians practise their faith

in the work setting is summed up in his challenge:

If finding God in our churches leads to us losing Him in our factories, then better we tear down those churches, for God must hate the sight of them.

In the context of the General Strike of 1926 and the forthcoming economic collapse of 1929 Studdert Kennedy wanted a fairer Britain, but not one in which the differences of wealth and

income completely disappeared. With ICF he favoured moderate rather than militant tactics, and a church that was more outspoken on political issues. He saw Christianity as a solution to social problems and believed that Christianity would make people in industry more committed to cooperation than conflict at work and more ready to promote a socially just society.

The DVD offers four short films entitled: *Crucifix, Hero, Cemetery,*



and *Puppet*, which draw on the writings and sermons of Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy.

These are profound insights into the nature of war and the character of God, which are challenging and thought-provoking. They are not for the faint-hearted and will offer excellent discussion starters for church groups and for older teens. In a school context they will probably be most helpful for years 11-13, although with care may be used also with thoughtful year 10 students.

The language expressed and the concepts examined have great depth, and may be described as quite academic for modern audiences despite the description of 'down to earth' in their original early 20th century context.

David Robinson gives a powerful and believable performance in bringing the words of Studdert-Kennedy to life. We hear of both the questions of the soldiers on the battle field and of the padre seeking to come to terms with the horrors of trench warfare.

In *Cemetery* Studdert-Kennedy reflects on burying bodies. He notes



that mothers will always want to know where their sons are buried, and that while Easter should fill Christians with joy and assurance, we still look for the living amongst the dead (cf. the angel's words to Mary at the tomb of Jesus). Yet the most powerful words in this film are that the experience of war 'laughed at my [Studdert-Kennedy's] petty religion', followed by his poem:

*Waste of muscle, waste of brain
Waste of patience, waste of pain
Waste of manhood, waste of health
Waste of beauty, waste of wealth
Waste of blood and waste of tears
Waste of youth's most precious years
Waste of ways the saints have trod
Waste of glory, waste of God
War*

Studdert-Kennedy was awarded the MC for an act of courage, running through enemy fire to fetch morphine for a wounded soldier. In *Hero* he tells us that it was hell in the concrete shelter with the incessant cries of pain and hell outside where the battle raged. Of his act of bravery he commented, 'We had no morphine. I went. Someone had to because the hell outside was not as bad as the hell inside!'

Crucifix asks the most direct questions about God. 'If God is in his heaven, why is it hell on earth?', the lads ask. When in England

before going to France, Studdert-Kennedy comments that he believed

'What's God like? He pointed to the crucifix. He testifies that he saw Christ on the cross in every death; and behind the cross, the empty tomb and Jesus with wounded hands ready to bless.'

in the rightness of the war and urged men to enlist. After his experiences on the front he said "war is only glorious when you buy it in the Daily Mail - it's good with bacon and eggs for breakfast. But real war is the bitter end of our brutality. The silliest, filthiest, most inhumane thing that has ever happened."

What's God like? He pointed to the crucifix. He testifies that he saw Christ on the cross in every death; and behind the cross, the empty tomb and Jesus with wounded hands ready to bless.

In the final of the four films, *Puppet*, we explore the meaning of 'Almighty God' in the face of war and suffering. He observes that force is a sign of weakness and not power, and that truth comes through love, and God is love. He believes that there is more strength in this statement than in all the armies, and more wealth than in all the banks.

'Almighty God' is a conventional way of describing the unknown power behind the universe, but to say God is love is revealed in our struggles, which when overcome prove that love is almighty in our lives.

The final challenge is to pledge our lives in the service of love.

These films are a most useful stepping-off point for discussions about war and suffering, life and death, the nature of God and the central place of the Cross.

I wholeheartedly commend these films to churches and schools as a resource for reflection on the meaning of life and the reality of God revealed in Christ. 