Helping Germans Meet Their Maker:
WW1 chaplain Paul Tillich

Short talk held by Sam Shearn at the Ashmolean Museum for the DEAD Friday event, 30th October 2015, in association with The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH).
This is a German Iron Cross, 2nd Class, from 1914. A medal signifying bravery, commitment, service, and heroism.

Tonight I am going to tell the story of a man who was awarded this medal in December 1914, and a second medal, the Iron Cross, 1st Class, on 9th June 1918. This man is a young theologian, whose life is the subject of my doctoral studies here at the University. His name is Paul Tillich.

It’s September 1914, he is 27 years old, with two doctorates under his belt, one in philosophy, one in theology, and with an eye on a career as an academic.
Tillich is working as an assistant pastor and working on his *Habilitation*. Struck by the outbreak of war, and seeing many of his contemporaries joining the war effort, he quickly marries his fiancée and signs up to serve in the German Army.

Within two weeks he has arrived in Bieuxy, France, to join the 7th Reserve Division fighting near the River Aisne. One of the officers remembers:

“a young Berlin theologian... thin and slim, a little reserved, outside of his role a little shy. ... Some intellectual veil surrounds his as yet youthful personality.”

This man has not come to bear arms, but to be chaplain to his compatriots. He is stationed with his artillery division and has quarters which “many times stand under fire from French artillery” – nearly two years of “sharing suffering and joy with the troop at the front and foremost front lines”.

This is a man helping Germans meet their Maker: accompanying men who are killing and being killed, a man surrounded by death, a man attending to the dying, and a man called to be an interpreter of death, to articulate the meaning of the deaths and the dying all around.

It’s 17th October 1914, he is stationed in Bieuxy, near the River Aisne, behind the front. Tillich’s
division lies dug-in in the trenches, listening to the shrapnel and grenades fly over their heads. Tillich is based in a house in the nearby village, which is a scene of devastation. It’s his first taste of war. He writes to his friend:

“The surroundings of the village, like most others, is waste and hideous, the unthreshed crops lie around rotting, between that broken waggons, bicycles, boxes and the like; suddenly a penetrant stench: a horse which has not been buried deep enough, a very common occurrence .... A few steps away from our house, 20 soldiers are buried from some earlier fight – simple wooden crosses with greenery, name and date burned on several. On the grave, a helmet.”

Tillich has not yet faced a battle himself. He hears of the death of his brother-in-law, Wolf, the second son of that family to have fallen in combat. And yet his letter to the family is full of morale, confidence, and strength:

“Two children in fullest most beautiful youth – that is as bitter as little else ... And yet it is something great to think that he had the “beautiful, the most beautiful death”, that he, the soldier, has fallen for the fatherland in an exceptional position. The wonderful reconciliation which I feel surrounds us over all the thousands of deaths, that all these dead did not die for themselves, but for something which is greater than every individual. Thus the dying is not merely as usual a natural event, but becomes an act in which we lay our whole will, our best, our inner
personality. Through this is proved that the personality is superior to all that is natural, even to dying. Thus, that is my inner certainty, our dear Wolf has also returned to the life from which all personal life comes, to the eternal homeland which receives no-one more [gladly] than the hero who did not count his life in time for much, for the sake of eternal goods. This certainty, dear parents, carries me now through all the dying around me and helps me past the thought that I too can in every moment take this path. ... This certainty makes us all strong.”

Note the assurance, morale, and reflection on death as an heroic act. Tillich is roused by the thought that people are dying not for themselves but for others, he sees the war as an occasion for some sort of inward, spiritual revival of Germany, and indeed the continent of Europe.

The tenor of heroism and presence of instrumental interpretations of death remain throughout the war. On reflection, it’s a strategy of sanity in such a situation. These deaths have to mean something, have to be effecting something, if one is to cope with the daily reality of death and dying. As such the chaplain, as an interpreter of death, engaged in meaning-making, enframing the deaths in a larger narrative, becomes vital to the survival of the division to which he is attached.
Tillich is holding services in abandoned churches, or in open-air, he preaches and administers the sacraments. He buries the dead, throwing three handfuls of earth into the grave, “Erde zu Erde, Asche zu Asche, Staub zu Staub”.

In **March 1915** Tillich writes again about heroism, but it is grittier, with a sense of the great attrition of human lives being ended, maimed, and worn down by the unceasing trench battles:

> “Our regiments 27 and 36, who keep Novron occupied, in 12-day shifts, for months they knew exactly that from those who went in, around 50 would not get out well: most heavily wounded, many dead, many lightly injured, some ill; in the night they often travel through Bieuxy after being replaced, dark, grey rows with flashlights shining here and there, a muffled mumbling, waiting, then onwards, in ¾ hour the first can be finished off by a fire attack, and when they get out, pale, thin, grey is the face, clay-brown the uniform, many have lice, all are coughing, so that the voice of the speaker hardly comes through. A quiet, wonderful heroism of which one speaks little but which surpasses everything else.”

After a long year by the Aisne, his regiments are moved to the Champagne region for what will become a six month campaign. It is here he experiences battles with heavy losses, the worst of which is the **Battle of Tahure**. This battle took place 100 years ago to this very day, this very evening, the 30th and 31st
October 1915. Let us hear the witness of Paul Tillich of that evening 100 years ago:

“We stood on a height: it was so powerful that the whole earth seemed like the surface of a drum pummelled by a madman. – And then when it became dark we marched off. It was the most powerful military and warrior show that I ever saw, perhaps one of the most magnificent at all. Nowhere... was so much heavy artillery from both sides united in a relatively small area; the earth shook literally now, the flashes of the shots flashed in all parts of the battlefield. The hits flamed like balls of light and fire and the flares spread daylight.

On the heights the French hit with fire-grenades. Fountains of fire sprayed up in the air; sulphurous steam covered the plain over which we travelled; I stumbled more than I walked in the confusion and greatness of the impressions. One’s own life became an atom in this fuming of the elements through men against men; but in me burrowed a bitter pain over the suffering and death which every one of these seconds brings over my poor regiments.”

You might wonder what a chaplain was doing there in the middle of a battle. But in times of battle, chaplains were up with their troops wherever the regiments found themselves, as morale boosters, listening to reports of experiences, attending to the wounded, holding the hands of the dying, reading the last rites, bringing drinks and food.
As Tillich retreats from the immediate front later that night he hears that one of the senior officers, his friend Bartenstein, has been killed. He also hears the murmurs and confusion of the troops:

“only a small part of the plan achieved, great losses, many prisoners lost, shot by our own artillery, the auxiliary regiments didn’t come with us.”

Earlier that evening he had encountered his friend Bartenstein in the field. Tillich says

“his face was changed by the strains and, through premonition of death. ... I brought him coffee, lunch and supper ... helped him wash, the highest pleasure for 14 days; then he went, and I was full of worry for him and with me others who had seen him. ‘I want to come back for my wife’s sake’ ... he had said to me often. ... Now his wish was not fulfilled ... I could not go to bed... I // went to the main treatment area ... spent the night in the room for the heavily wounded. Hour after hour passed, waggons came, cars drove, again and again new [men], first in the dressing room, then to me in the barracks. At some point I drank coffee in the kitchen for the wounded, every hour 5 grenades hit the heights nearby, so that I went out [to check] and then calmed the wounded; there were the very old and the very young, acquaintances and new ones from the storm-regiments, everyone told me something else, everyone told me that his own artillery had wounded him. All were mirthless and miserable: a few groaned, only one had to be amputated. Nearly every hour one died and was carried out, now building right and left the watch for the entrance. It was twenty by the end of the night.”
“I slept in the day and in the afternoon was Bartenstein’s burial. I could not and did not want to speak, but I spoke the liturgy – those were the three heaviest handfuls of earth in the whole war, and they were sticky and white as clay, so that one had to sling them.

Then it was all over; but two hours later seven coffinless corpses lay by another in front of me and I said something, but my soul was by the one grave ... and so it has remained, until today, day for day, two, often three times...”

It is one thing to hold a funeral, you see, to visit the relatives of the deceased, hear their stories and prepare an address which both honours the dead and casts before their hearts a vision of final consolation.

It is another thing to be overwhelmed by waves of corpses presented without honour or time or occasion. To be a chaplain on that evening 100 years ago was to become a liturgical cog in the machine of war, to find all seeds of meaning, significance and consolation trampled by the ceaseless horror and waste of what is unfolding before your eyes. It’s hard to keep the faith, it’s hard to be strong.

Seven months later, it’s **June 1916, on the battlefields of Verdun**. Tillich is in the cellar of a bombed-out house which is functioning as a field hospital, with

“two holes forming the entrance ... the ceiling at its highest point only as high as a man, with four rooms, with space
for 40 lying wounded. One room is filled with 100 medical orderlies, one dressing room ... the access road of the ambulances stands 1 and ½ hours journey away and under artillery fire. ...

On three of these nights I think back with particular horror. In one night the overcrowding had become so great that the doctors could no longer work. On the dressing table, under it, in every passageway were the stretchers, between them the orderlies, who achieved the superhuman, in layers over each other, arms and legs intertwined, in dull sleep, no thought of lying down, although one had been in movement for 48 hours, no place to sit. So I spent an hour standing with closed eyes, until new wounded arrived outside. ...”

In such moments Tillich had no religious conversations with the soldiers, it was about being there:

“we held the hands of the particularly restless ones for a long time, to help them sleep; with the embittered who in their fevered agitation held angry speeches, we spoke gently. I asked all about their home, their job, their family, distracting their thoughts toward a better past and future ... the dying are under strong morphium, the head wounds cause unconsciousness anyway. I only experienced one case of conscious and clear death. ...”

“We doctors and pastors experiences these days in the cellar as a turning point in our war life. Physically and psychologically we can no longer become that which we once were. Yet we would not want to have missed these
days. They were the greatest and heaviest hours in our chaplaincy.”

How does Tillich continue to fulfil his duties as chaplain? How does he even begin to ‘do God’ in situations like this?

Tillich interprets death in many ways, but the most common tropes are that of heroism and service. The dead died for others, and as such are like Christ. They have become like the man on the cross. The dead died for the fatherland, which through this experience and sacrifice is becoming more serious, mature. God is leading humanity to an eternal calling, even through destruction and misery.

At the same time Tillich is aware that those who listen and participate in his field services, perhaps still hungry to receive the bread and the wine out of some sense of belonging, have become old and bitter with God and religious promises, and that many have lost their faith:

In his Christmas sermon from 1917 – the fourth and final Christmas at war – he articulates the feelings of many:

“the peoples who name themselves after the child of Bethlehem are destroying each other in wild hate. Pain and misery in inexpressible fullness dwells in the houses and hearts, with the poor and destitute, with the widows and
orphans, with the wounded and dying, with the lonely and despairing. And some hearts have become bitter, that they look away from the light of the holy night, and some hearts have become dark, that they can no longer believe the message of the holy night, and many, many ask: Where is then this God of peace, whose favour rests on humanity? In what should we recognise him? Who can say to us, that the light is stronger than the darkness and that the holy night is more than a beautiful, [but] long vanished childhood dream?”

Tillich’s sensitivity to the doubt and questions of his listeners was not merely pastoral. It was also existential. Tillich’s own faith was ploughed up and changed by his theological and philosophical reflection, as well as the experience of the war.

But he still retains a faith. Tillich often calls his listeners to seek God not as the almighty but in the face of the Christ child. The soldiers should attend to the gaze of Christ, where we may find God’s glory.

In April 1918, after Easter, news of victory on the Eastern front, through the Treaty of Brest-Litovisk, has reached the Western front. Tillich interprets the lack of success and many deaths on the Western front in terms of the “perfect love” shown in the death and resurrection of Christ, for “suffering and perseverance ... outer lack of success and fame” in the West has brought about the “victory and peace fought for in the
East”. The soldiers have been faithful as they followed Christ’s path down a road of destruction for the fruits of the kingdom of God. This kingdom is not understood literally or in a nationalistic way; Tillich can indeed also pray for the enemy. Rather, God’s gift is a

“good, glad conscience, the victory over fear and hardship, the honour of being a victor over oneself, the honour of being able to freely gaze upon the eternal throne.”

God is not imagined as giving great external success in war, but as the

“accompanier ... who is with us everywhere, who speaks to us in the hiddenness of our soul, who entrusts himself to us and to whom we can entrust ourselves, from whose hands even death cannot tear us away.”

“God helps us, even when he lets us die. Whoever has not understood this, he still has a small God, who one could rightly mock, he is still far from the living, holy, eternal, merciful God. ... What God’s help is, is his being near.”

I discern a change in Tillich’s interpretation of death. Gone, I think, is the belief expressed at the beginning that these deaths, as heroic deaths, are somehow a proof of the eternal. The tone has moved from an upbeat celebration of the glory of such deaths toward a theologia crucis, a theology of the cross, an emphasis on suffering as God’s way, and a personal spirituality, a friendship with God which death cannot defeat.
The strain of Tillich’s task of interpreting death while surrounded by death did not leave him unscathed. Towards the very end of the war, in the summer of 1918, when the Germans had forced incredible advances, and then been driven back with heavy losses, Tillich had a nervous breakdown and was removed from his service in France back to the Spandau barracks in Berlin, where he recovered.

Paul Tillich was to become one of the great theologians of the 20th Century. In April 1933, he was dean of the faculty of philosophy at the University of Frankfurt when the Nazis suspended him from his post for being too critical, too socialist, not nationalist enough. He emigrated to America where he taught theology and became something of a public intellectual, with a heavy German accent.

If you only read one thing by Tillich in your life, I would recommend the slim band of sermons *Shaking the Foundations*, published 1948, where Tillich speaks into the situation of a civilization shaken after two world wars, a culture which feels the threat of devastation under a new era of nuclear weaponry. Tillich’s ability to communicate to such a culture was formed in the quite literal shaking of the foundations he experienced as a German army chaplain in France, between 1914-1918.
Notes

1 Account of Brigadeadjutant Erich Pfeiffer, *EGW V*, 80. Translations of all the sources from the German are my own.
5 Letter to father, 9th March 1915 in *EGW V*, 88.
6 Letter to his family, November 1915, *EGW V*, 93-94.
7 Letter to his family, November 1915, *EGW V*, 94.
8 Letter to his family, November 1915, *EGW V*, 94-95.
9 Letter to his family, November 1915, *EGW V*, 95.
14 Sermon at Christmas, 1917, *EGW VII*, 625
15 “look into the eyes of the Christmas child”; Sermon at Christmas, 1917, *EGW VII*, 626. For other examples of this trope in Tillich’s Christmas sermons, see *EGW VII*, 369; 423; 522; 527.
16 Sermon in April 1918, *EGW VII*, 636.
18 Sermon in April 1918, *EGW VII*, 638.
19 Sermon in April 1918, *EGW VII*, 637.
21 One Lent sermon in *EGW VII* is undated but the editor suggested 1918, cf. *EGW VII*, 632-635. This sermon talks again about every death being a “proof of human dignity”. However, overall I think it unlikely that this sermon is from 1918 because its content and tone do not fit well with the others of that period. I suggest it is from Lent 1915.