

**Catherine Butcher**  
recounts the stories of  
self-sacrifice of two  
Christians in the Great War

# NO GREATER LOVE

**G**reater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.<sup>1</sup> These words are quoted often at events commemorating those lost in war. Here are stories of two Christians in the Great War who knew the greater love of Jesus; love that extends to their neighbours and even to their enemies.

Captain Noel Godfrey Chavasse (9 November 1884 – 4 August 1917) was a medical doctor and British Army officer in the Great War, one of only three people to be awarded a Victoria Cross twice. He graduated from Trinity College, Oxford, in 1907 with first class honours, and went on to study medicine under the eminent orthopaedic surgeon Sir Robert Jones. He passed the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons examination in May 1910 and registered as a doctor with the General Medical Council in July 1912. In early 1913, Chavasse was accepted by the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) and joined the Territorial battalion of the King's (Liverpool Regiment), the Liverpool Scottish.

On 1 November, 1914 when Chavasse left with his battalion for France, he wrote to his father, the Bishop of Liverpool: 'Goodbye my dear father. I am going to do my best to be a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ and King George.' He quickly gained a reputation for special commitment to his men. It was unusual for medical officers to do the dangerous work rescuing the wounded. But often Chavasse would work in surgery all day then to go with the stretcher bearers into No Man's Land at night, leading the way while exploding shells and bullets whistled around their ears.

Towards the end of July 1916, Chavasse's battalion was sent to the trenches of the Somme. On 8 August, under a hail of machine gun fire, the battalion of 600 soldiers was devastated. Twice wounded by shell blasts, Noel kept working. He went to within 20 metres of the German front line to rescue three wounded soldiers resulting in his first Victoria Cross. The citation reads: 'His courage and self-sacrifice were beyond praise.'

After he recovered, similar sacrificial action in the offensive at Passchendaele gained him a second VC. The second citation reads: 'Though severely wounded early in the action whilst carrying a wounded soldier to the Dressing Station, Capt. Chavasse refused to leave his post, and for two days not only continued to perform his duties, but in addition went out repeatedly under heavy fire to search for and attend to the wounded... By his extraordinary energy and inspiring example, he was instrumental in rescuing many wounded... This devoted and gallant officer subsequently died of his wounds.'

Commenting on his death, Noel's father said: 'He followed his Saviour so closely in his death, and literally laid down his life for his men.'

Self-sacrifice was the hallmark of Nurse Edith Cavell's life. Edith was executed on 12 October 1915 for enabling around 200 Allied soldiers to escape to neutral territory, but her care had extended to German and Allied soldiers alike. Edith understood that Jesus' greater love commands us to love our enemies as well as our

neighbours and friends. As she took communion for the last time, the minister with her said, 'We shall remember you as a heroine and a martyr.' She replied, 'Don't think of me like that. Think of me as a nurse who tried to do her duty.'

Edith Cavell was born near Norwich in 1865. The daughter of a Norfolk vicar, and a devout Christian, she was accepted for training at the London Hospital under Eva Lückes in April 1896. In the summer of 1897, an epidemic of typhoid fever broke out in Maidstone. Six of Miss Lückes' nurses were seconded to help, including Edith. Several other nursing posts followed as Edith gained experience as a Night Superintendent, Assistant Matron and Matron. She was often seen praying at patients' bedsides.

As a fluent French-speaker, her skills came to the attention of Dr Antoine Depage, one of the founders of the International Surgical Society (1902–1912). In 1903 he founded a surgical institute and Edith became its head nurse, pioneering the training of nurses in Belgium along the lines of Florence Nightingale. The pioneer training school on the outskirts of Brussels was formed out of four adjoining houses and opened in October 1907. By 1912, Edith was providing nurses for three hospitals, 24 communal schools and 13 kindergartens. When Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914, Edith was visiting her mother in Norfolk, but decided to return to her work: 'At a time like this,' she said, 'I am more needed than ever.'

Her clinic became a Red Cross hospital with German and Belgian soldiers receiving the same attention. When Brussels fell, 60 English nurses were sent home but Edith remained. In the autumn of 1914, two stranded British soldiers found their way to the training school and she sheltered them for two weeks. Others followed and Edith helped them to escape to neutral territory in Holland. She was trained to protect life: 'Had I not helped,' she said, 'they would have been shot.'

By August 1915 a Belgian 'collaborator' had passed through Edith's hands and the school was searched. Two members of the escape team were arrested on 31 July 1915. Five days later, Nurse Cavell was interned, and was tried and sentenced to death for treason ten weeks later.

A German Lutheran prison chaplain gained permission for an English Chaplain to visit her on the night before she died. They repeated the words of 'Abide with me' and Edith received Communion. She said, 'I am thankful to have had these ten weeks of quiet to get ready. Now I have had them and have been kindly treated here. I expected my sentence and I believe it was just. Standing as I do in view of God and eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough, I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.'

She was executed by firing squad the next morning.

*Catherine Butcher is a freelance writer based in Sussex. Her biography of Edith Cavell will be published by Lion in 2015.*

## reference

1. John 15:13