

To fight or not to fight?

Owen Thomas was born in 1893, so when World War One began he was 21.

He was orphaned when he was 6 years old, and grew up in a big orphanage in Bristol with hundreds of other children whose parents had died. The orphanage was started by a famous Christian man, George Muller (lots of information at www.mullers.org/). Muller believed that people could find God through prayer and faith, and that it was a good life to live exactly as Jesus taught in the Bible.

Young Owen grew up to be a believer as well, and always tried to do just what Jesus said. When he was 14, he became an apprentice leather worker in the small town of Devizes, in Wiltshire and he joined a church there called 'Salem Chapel.'

'Salem' means 'peace'.

When the war began, many young men of Owen's age from Devizes joined the army. Owen wondered what to do. He remembered the teaching of Jesus: 'Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.' He was sure it was wrong to carry a gun, to threaten others and certainly wrong to kill. He didn't want to kill German people. He carried on working in the leather workshop. After two years, when more and more soldiers were needed, the British government made a new law. Every man of the right age who was fit must join the army. If anyone refused, they would be sent to prison. What should Owen do now?

There were other British people who had the same idea as Owen. Lots were Christian people, and some were Socialists (can you find out, or do you know, what a Socialist is?). The government recognised that these people were doing what they thought was right, so they set up the Non Combatant Corps. It was an army unit where men did not have to carry a gun, or try to kill enemy soldiers. Instead you would be given other work: carrying stretchers, loading and unloading supplies, digging trenches, working at the docks. Owen decided that he would join the NCC. There were about 8000 other people in Britain who joined the NCC the year it started in 1916. That way Owen believed he could serve his country, but would not be involved in killing people, so he could follow Jesus' teaching as he understood it too.

The next Monday morning he was ordered to catch the train from Devizes Railway Station to get ready to go to the war France. There were ten others from Devizes who were going to fight, and they all stood in a group. A crowd came to cheer them on their way. The ten new soldiers refused to stand with Owen. They whispered: 'Coward'. He stood on his own at the end of the platform. How do you think he felt? The mayor of the town came to see them all off. He was a Christian who shared Owen's understanding of the teaching of Jesus. He walked deliberately down to Owen at the far end of the platform and shook his hand first, then shook hands with all the others. 'Best wishes' he said to each man 'Be brave, and we hope you return safe to Devizes soon.' The crowd cheered, and they all got onto the train and left.

Owen spent the next two years in France, and he never picked up a gun. Sometimes he carried stretchers in the most dangerous parts of the battlefield. That was saving lives, not threatening them. Sometimes he did heavy work on the docks, unloading supplies. He was part of a company of 100 non-combatants. Only 20 of his company survived. Owen was one of the fortunate ones. He came back home to Devizes when the war was over. While he was away he learned to speak French, and for the rest of his life he often preached in Salem Chapel, his church, about the teachings of Jesus. He could preach in French and English, because of the war. Everyone said he was a cheerful, happy and generous man.

He died in 1977, aged 84. At his funeral, the minister said 'He never said a bad word about anyone.'



Questions to talk about and write about:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why do you think Owen believed it was wrong to try and kill Germans?• Do you think the Government was right to set up the Non Combatant Corps?• Was it cowardly to refuse to fight in WW1? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some Christians were willing to fight in the war, others were not. Why do you think not all Christians felt the same way?• In what ways did Owen follow Jesus' teaching?• If you had faced Owen's decision, what would you have done? |
|--|---|