

# Remembering Edith Cavell amid Covid 19

## Reflections for the 105<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Edith Cavell's execution, October 12 2020

Our own experiences and those of our families across the world of CV19 will remain with us all our lives. These are in many ways paralleled by those in occupied Brussels in 1914-5. The story from that city of nurse Edith Cavell, eldest daughter of the vicar of Swardeston near Norwich, can give us pause for thought. How she chose to live in challenging circumstances and how she died offer us a worthy example for today and for the months ahead.



Edith Cavell in her garden in Brussels around 1913

**Prepared by Nick Miller  
Cavell Archivist for St Mary's Church Swardeston**

## Covid 19: 2020

### Some key words setting the context for reflection

|             |                       |             |                 |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Fear        | Dislocation           | Risks       | Mis-information |
| Isolation   | Exhaustion            | Rules       | Disappointment  |
| Anger       | Uncertainty           | Panic       | Pressure        |
| Shortages   | Transmission          | Poverty     | Hope-lessness   |
| Frustration | Unknowns              | Pain        | Unemployment    |
| Shielding   | Depression and stress | Eerie quiet |                 |

|                      |                |                |             |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Leadership           | Choices        | Gratitude      | Honouring   |
| Example              | Dedication     | Duty           | Life-saving |
| Compassion           | Re-building    | Reunion        | Endurance   |
| Neighbourliness      | Hard work      | Self-sacrifice | Trust       |
| Brought back to life | Long-suffering | Hope           |             |
| Kindness             | Renewal        | Coping         | Patience    |

### Sections of this reflection

|  | <b>Page</b> |
|--|-------------|
| <b>Background</b>  | <b>3</b>    |
| <b>The crisis: preparation and response</b>                | <b>3</b>    |
| <b>'Lockdown' - rules and risks</b>                        | <b>4</b>    |
| <b>Isolation and endurance</b>                             | <b>5</b>    |
| <b>'When better days come' – a future after the crisis</b> | <b>7</b>    |
| <b>Last rites</b>  | <b>7</b>    |
| <b>Not the end of the story</b>                            | <b>8</b>    |

Quotations from the Bible (New International Version) are highlighted in yellow. These are related to Edith Cavell's life, choices and motivation but have enduring relevance to our contemporary concerns and how we can respond in our turn as we confront similar issues.

## Background

Britain and the Empire declared war on Germany on August 4<sup>th</sup> 1914. The German army swept through Belgium *en route* to Paris. There was fierce resistance from the Belgian and French armies and from the 100,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force. They were all vastly outnumbered and there were heavy casualties on both sides. The speed of the advance left allied soldiers behind the German line needing medical care and shielding from the new occupiers of Belgium.

Edith Cavell had been in charge of starting professional nursing in Brussels since 1907. By 1914 she had some 300 nurses deployed in various settings across the city.

## The crisis: preparation and response

Edith Cavell had hurried back to Belgium from her annual holiday in Norfolk on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1914. She chose to return to Brussels to what would be a war situation: *'My duty is with my nurses'*

**'Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem'**. (Luke 9:51). **He was well aware that this would most likely lead to his death**

She oversaw the preparation of many hospital beds, including in the Royal Palace – the wounded were expected, in unknown numbers.

She wrote: *We have just heard there has been a great battle. Over 700 wounded. Crowds assemble to see the wounded [arrive] – the men with bared heads, the women with wet eyes. War is terrible in this little country where everyone has a friend or relative in the army.*

The nursing of the wounded and dying involved much hard work - one of Edith's colleagues, Nurse Moore, recalled: *'I often saw one or other of my companions lying exhausted in her bed in her off duty times, sometimes weeping. We were none of us used to this sort of life.'*

For several weeks they remained in a state of readiness. Few civilian patients were admitted. Beds were waiting and the wards cleaned every day.

Edith was clear – nurses would nurse all the wounded. *'Any wounded soldier must be treated, friend or foe. Each man is a father, husband or son. As nurses you must take no part in the quarrel – our work is for humanity. The profession of nursing knows no frontiers.'*

**Jesus told a story of a good Samaritan. Unlike others he acted as a 'good neighbour', risking his life caring for a Jew who had been robbed, despite animosity between Jews and Samaritans** St Luke's gospel, chapter 10 verses 25-37

## Reflection

Edith's familiar world was dislocated in a matter of a week. As with Covid she had little idea of the magnitude of the changes ahead but she led from the front, calmly and in her usual ordered fashion.

As with Covid's new requirements, nursing seriously wounded from a battlefield will have been a first for many of her nurses. Caring for German wounded presented a new challenge – suppressing any disgust at the mayhem they represented and seeing them as all other patients. With limited nursing capacity inevitable choices between patients will have presented further conflicts, with associated distress.

## 'Lockdown' - rules and risks

Once the Germans entered Brussels on August 20 there was a swift and total 'lockdown'



German soldiers marching into Brussels 20 August 1914

With no radio or newspapers people only learnt of new German laws by reading their posters on the street. All foreigners were required to register with the German authorities. Edith refused to do so, based on her status under international law as a Red Cross nurse. This 'resistance' could have led to her imprisonment or expulsion.

More significantly, two months later she refused to obey a requirement to report and hand in any allied soldiers. If caught she knew they could be shot as spies as they would be in civilian clothes. Those failing to hand them over could also be shot. She had seen allied troops taken from their hospital beds and put on trains to POW camps, regardless of their condition, and had heard of summary executions.

Refusal to obey this order could also put at risk all that she was doing and her colleagues. She knew others had already risked their lives bringing British and French men from southern Belgium to the centre of the city. If she now gave these men up, the efforts of all the others in this chain would be in vain.

She chose to take in the first two wounded British soldiers brought secretly to her Clinique on November 1. From then on, for nine long months, she sheltered men and helped them to freedom in Holland. She collaborated with other 'key workers' in a loose underground network. She would accompany the men to pre-arranged rendezvous in cafes, parks or on street corners, knowing both she and they might be arrested. Among the 200 men she helped were at least six soldiers from Norfolk.

'If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?' (St John's first letter, chapter 3 verse 17).

### Reflection

As with Covid the imposition of new rules with no scope for debate or question will have been irksome - all the more so in Belgium as the requirements came from a 'hostile' source. Edith had to make a moral choice - to obey and 'betray' or to resist and risk everything.

Nurses and carers for Covid patients knew what should be done and some took risks (lacking information, PPE, shortage of ventilators, admitting patients to nursing homes from hospitals etc) to do what they could for those in their care. The wider population initially tended to obey regulations - but as time wore on and effects of such compliance were questioned less 'conformity' is evident.

## Isolation and endurance

Her employer, the eminent surgeon Dr Depage, had moved (with his nurse wife who was a close friend of Edith's) to the Belgian coast to manage the key Belgian hospital for the wounded there. They were not able to be in contact.



Dr Depage, Edith Cavell and nursing staff c 1910

Many of the nurses Edith had trained left Brussels for home or service elsewhere. She was living every day with uncertainty and responsibility.

*'Life has reverted to the Middle Ages'*, she wrote. There was a shortage of bread. Poverty became extreme – there were soup kitchens and feeding stations for children and bases handing out clothes. *'The once busy streets are very quiet. No one goes to the theatre or a concert.'*

In Brussels the building work Edith Cavell was supervising on a new Nursing School ground to a halt early in the War .. no materials were accessible. Workmen were not allowed to travel. (The project was only completed in 1922).

For Christmas 1914 Edith arranged an all-day party for her staff and 30 very poor children. There was a decorated tree and presents for each child – clothes, with toys and dolls and sweets sent from America. For tea, currant buns and jam tarts were served. Sgt Tunmore and Private Lewis from Norfolk joined in the tea, coming up from their hiding place in the Clinique's basement.

Grace Gemmett (aged around 20) who lived with Edith became depressed - the war and the atmosphere of anxiety exacerbated her illness. Edith sought medical help but not much was on offer for mental illness

She only had fleeting contact with her underground colleagues – she had to trust them and their choices in helping the men they brought to her. By mid-May 1915 she reported that *'German spies are everywhere'*. There were regular searches at her *Clinique*. She was under enormous pressure – she wrote to a contact in the network: *"Tell all the helpers not to send any more men here for the present as my situation is becoming more and more strained every day"* – but later she said *"If one (allied soldier) were captured and shot it would be our fault. If we are arrested we shall be punished whether we have done much or little. So let's go ahead and save as many of these unfortunate men as possible."*

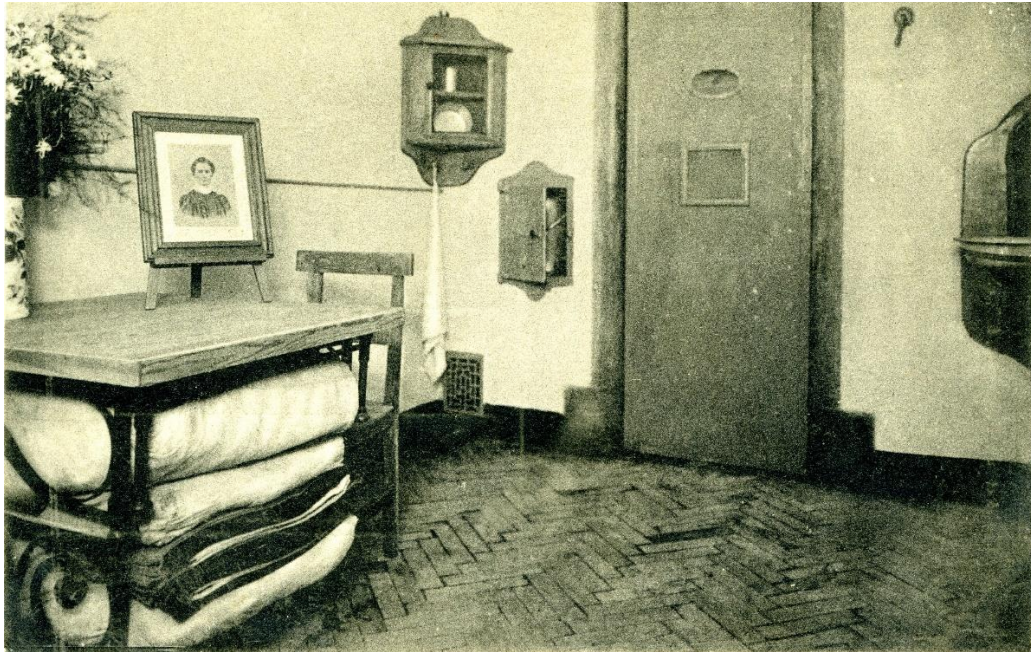


The psalmist sought help from God as Edith will have done:

Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; hear me and answer me.

My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me. Fear and trembling have beset me; I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest." Psalm 55

Finally on August 5th after several network colleagues had been arrested, she too was taken to the police headquarters. She spent the next ten weeks in solitary confinement in St Gilles prison.



Edith Cavell's cell in St Gilles prison, August 5<sup>th</sup> – October 12<sup>th</sup>

The authorities allowed her only very rare visits, two books, little mail and only half an hour's fresh air daily (she was prevented from seeing any other prisoners or being seen by them).

She was living with God in her cell – her only books were her well-worn Prayer Book with all the Psalms and her copy of Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. She may well have called to mind St John's record of the last words of Jesus to his disciples before his arrest:

'The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.' St John's gospel chapter 16, verses 27 and 33

On her last night she said to her friend Revd Stirling Gahan '*I am thankful for the imposed silence of my ten weeks imprisonment: it has been like a solemn fast from earthly distractions and diversions*'. '*Life has always been hurried and full of difficulty. This time of rest has been a great mercy...*'

Blessed are those whose strength is in you. As they pass through the vale of weeping, they make it a place of springs. Psalm 84.5

Edith stated: '*I expected my sentence and I believe it was just.*' Many would have responded more negatively given all she had done in the city over 7 years. She had, however, settled that her choice to help the soldiers might end this way and chose not to flee to Holland and freedom.

## Reflection

The ending of 'normal' life as the world responds to Covid has much in common with Edith's experience in Brussels. It takes courage and initiative to keep up morale in oneself and among one's contacts. Having to self-isolate and to surrender contact with those one loves, taking account of all the danger contact might bring, tests us all. We rail against the restrictions and are impatient for a return to 'normal. Perhaps Edith's lived example is a model for us for now and in the winter ahead...

## 'When better days come' – a future after the crisis

Edith Cavell wrote a farewell letter to her nurses from her cell: *'When better days come our work will again grow and resume all its power for doing good. I told you in our evening conversations that devotion would bring you true happiness and that the thought that before God you have done your duty well and with a good heart will sustain you in the hard moments of life and in the face of death. I may have been strict, but I have loved you more than you can know*

Jesus said: 'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.' (St John's gospel chapter 15 verses 12-13)

She had told Rev Gahan *'I have no fear or shrinking. I have seen death so often it is not strange or fearful to me'*. As Gahan left her she said to him *'We will meet again'*, well aware that he would not be in attendance at her execution.

## Reflection

Edith was clear as she wrote this last letter: she saw the need for endurance and for hanging on to a hope-ful future. She had served both as nurse and life-saver for the soldiers, following Christ's example as best she could in her own circumstances. She asked for forgiveness of colleagues to whom she may have seemed overly strict at times – underneath the formidable exterior and self-control was a heart of consistent and hope-ful love. Her assurance of life beyond her imminent death is a challenge to us all in a post-Christian world. Her firm hope as a follower of the crucified and resurrected Jesus assured her of resurrection and eternal life with God – this held her steady and hope-ful in the face of her own death.

## Last rites

She was executed by firing squad at 7 a.m. on October 12<sup>th</sup> 1915, just 15 hours after learning of the confirmation of her death sentence. She died along with Philippe Baucq, one of the leaders of the underground network.

She said to the chaplain at the end *'My conscience is clear. I die for God and my country'*.

She had been strong in her decision that she could not in good conscience send men from her country to their death – so she faced it in their place.

The doctor in attendance wrote: *"She went to her death with a bearing which is quite impossible to forget"*.

*'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor any powers, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord'*. Extracts from St Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 8, verse 35 on

Hours before she had said to Rev Gahan in her cell: *'Standing as I do in the light of God and eternity, I have realised that patriotism is not enough: I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone'*. (Gahan's private manuscript version of their interview reads: *'It is not enough to love one's own people: one must love all men and hate none.'*)

She and Baucq were hurriedly buried where they fell. On the streets a brief notice appeared with the executions and sentences on the others accused (to warn others of what disobedience to the German law would lead to). No undertaker, no funeral service, no opportunity to pay respects or lay wreaths.

### Reflection

At the height of the first wave of Covid, restrictions to prevent its spread were felt to be draconian by some. Even today only 30 may attend a funeral in church. For Edith death was not the end – she was clear she would come to God for eternity. Today's mourners are in company with Edith's mother and family, learning of her death far away and, in her case, having no way of saying their farewells.

## Not the end of the story

Edith's story spread like wildfire - in Belgium, along the Western Front, back home and across the world. A national memorial service was held at St Paul's Cathedral two weeks after her execution. The Prime Minister and many other leaders were present and hundreds more stood in silence outside. In May 1919 her body was returned home, with a service in a packed Westminster Abbey and burial at the east end of Norwich Cathedral. Thousands lined the streets of London and the railway line to Norwich.

She was portrayed as an iconic patriotic figure. Many, along with Rev Gahan, felt she should always be remembered *'as a heroine and a martyr'*. She has the last word to her friend: *'Think of me simply a nurse who tried to do her duty'*.

### Reflection

At the height of the first Covid 'wave', the nation regularly clapped outside front doors in the evenings in honour of health workers. As with Edith's commemoration, courage, endurance, risk-taking and caring commitment to strangers were being applauded and valued – qualities all too often overlooked in 'normal' times.

Edith was obeying her Lord's command and example – imitating Christ in how she lived, how she made her choices, how she led as a nurse leader, and, ultimately, how she died:

Jesus said: *'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.'* (St John's gospel chapter 15 verses 12-13). *I am the resurrection and the life: the one who believes in me will live, even though they die.* (Chapter 11 verse 25)

For more detail on Edith Cavell's story visit [www.edithcavell.org.uk](http://www.edithcavell.org.uk):  
email [enquiry@edithcavell.org.uk](mailto:enquiry@edithcavell.org.uk)

Work in her memory continues – The Cavell Nurses Trust supports healthcare workers in the UK who have fallen on difficult times

See [www.cavellnursestrust.org](http://www.cavellnursestrust.org)