

## Remembrance Day Sermon St Luke's Church, 10.11.24

Back in 1896 – two things happened that had an effect on my family. The first was, someone built the house I now live in in Church Road, Lydney. The second, a woman called Elizabeth, who was married to a certain Edward Pruen, gave birth to a son.

They called him Philip. His grandad was a vicar. His great, great grandfather was called Thomas Pruen – my four great's grandfather. The family lived in Shanklin, on the I.O.W. where his dad, Edward, worked for the railways. On 8 November, 1896, Philip was baptised in the local church.

After a while, his family moved to 31 Hartington Road in the St Paul's area of Gloucester. The small terraced house is still there. In 1914 the First Worldwide War had begun and Philip was now 18 years old - old enough to be conscripted into the Army. And so, on the 8<sup>th</sup> September of that year he became a soldier, a Private in the Gloucester Regiment, based up the road from here.

Philip Pruen was given his kitbag. **Here it is, the very same.**

After training and various deployments, he landed in France on 23 May 1916 and soon he was having a miserable time in the trenches. Laid end-to-end the trenches of the First World War would measure some 25,000 miles. That's long enough to stretch all the way around the Earth. The trenches became symbols of the futility of war, yet despite this, the Chaplain in the trenches said how popular Philip was. He said, he was always so "*merry and bright*".`

Philip was a stretcher bearer, I cannot imagine what he experienced – he saw the worst of war. On one occasion, an explosion in the trenches in Belgium was so unbelievably loud that the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, heard it all the way back in Downing Street, London — 140 miles away.

To relieve the times of boredom mixed with times of utter terror, he embroidered forget-me-not cards which he sent to his mum back home. **Here are the cards** he made for her. She was now alone as a widow, as Edward Pruen, her husband, had died.

On 22 August 1917 the Glosters attacked Pond Farm north of Ypres during which 3 officers and 16 other ranks were killed. Philip received the Military Medal for his "*cheerfulness and bravery under heavy shell fire*". during this action. His mum read about it in the Gloucestershire Chronicle 3 months later. Philip also received the British War Medal and Victory Medal. **Here are his medals.** Sadly, his service records did not survive.

But in March 1918, shortly before the end of the War, **this envelope** arrived by post 31 Hartington Road in Gloucester.

It was addressed to Philip's mum. It has the words: "On His Majesty's Service" printed at the top. Elizabeth sat at her kitchen table and opened it. This is what it said:

*The Territorial Force Association for Gloucestershire desires to express its warmest sympathy with you in the loss of your gallant "son, Private Philip Pruen, 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Gloucester Regiment", who gave his life for his Country, "in action 21/31 March 1918."*

*England today, perhaps more than at any time in her glorious history expects every man to do his duty, and it must be some consolation to you to feel that, in making the ultimate sacrifice, your "son" justified, to the supreme point, his Country's trust in her Sons.*

It transpired that on 21 March 1918 Philip's battalion was at Holnon Wood, near St. Quentin when the Germans launched their spring offensive, Operation Michael. The British Army was forced to retreat in the general direction of Amiens. A week later, the battalion was ordered to counter attack the enemy on the St Quentin to Amiens road. 200 Glosters were killed. Philip Dineley Pruen died, aged 21, sometime between 21 and 31 March 1918 on that road. Sadly he has no known grave but he is commemorated on the Pozieres Memorial, at the Somme in France. Today, his name is on the War Memorial in the heart of Gloucester city, less than a mile from his old home. Shortly afterwards, his kitbag and his few belongings also arrived in the post – the address written on the bag itself. His mother then received a dependent's pension of 15 shillings per week which gradually reduced as time went by. She died alone, 16 years later in 1934, bereft of her husband and her only son, Philip. At that point, that branch of the family tree came to an end.

I tell you this story for two reasons, first because it has never been told in a Remembrance Sunday sermon before – and as I now live in Gloucestershire, I wanted to honour Philip in his home county.

We remember him, and the millions like him, lest we forget.

But second, because war is not about statistics but about families. It was *then*, and it is *now*.

When we read of people being killed in places like the Ukraine, it is families who suffer. Real people who go shopping, who remember days out at the seaside, laughing with friends, celebrating the birth of their children, worshipping in church, mosque or synagogue.

War always takes place where people live.

The people who suffer physical and mental distress in war, or who desperately seek safety from it are people like you and me. They yearn to live in peace, where their children can go to school, where mum and dad can work and be safe in their own land.

But because of the madness of a few criminal dictators, whole populations seek safety in a neighbouring country as refugees. There are over 122 million displaced people in the world, many are trying to escape war – over 28m of them are children. Their stories are harrowing. Children fleeing their villages, often in Africa, where they are at risk of being abducted to become child soldiers for a violent regime. Living on their wits – many losing their young lives – a few making it to some kind of safety.

War always happens where children live.

Today we remember them, and the millions like them, lest we forget.

The UK receives just 1%, a tiny fraction, of the world's refugees. If those running from war manage to get across the Channel, we give them £7 a day to live on while they are assessed, which is less than France, during which time they are not allowed to work. It takes about a year before we decide.

Today, increasingly, it is the families and children who suffer.

In WW1 it was just 10% of civilians who lost their lives. In WW2 it was 50%. But today, in so-called modern warfare, despite all our sophisticated guided weapons, 90% of people who die are civilians.

I cannot preach today without us remembering the people of the Ukraine – where 6 million people have fled their homes. Our hearts go out to them.  
We pray for the Russians and the people of the Ukraine.

And I cannot preach today without us remembering the civilians of Gaza where 69% who have been killed are women and children.

Gaza is a thin strip of land which from north to south is the same distance as from Tutshill to Gloucester. For decades, over 2 million Palestinians have been trapped there, over half of them are children. Yet since we gathered here this time last year, to pray for peace, over 75,000 tons of explosives has been dropped on these people. That's five and more than Hiroshima was -(15,000 tonnes).

This has destroyed 34 hospitals killing nearly 1000 nurses and doctors,  
over 400 schools and all the universities,  
and left well over 42,000 dead,  
17,000 of whom are children,  
10,000 are missing under the rubble,  
100,000 are badly injured,  
2 million are displaced and almost every home destroyed  
and with water supplies destroyed, there is now mass disease and starvation.

I have friends who live there. They are beautiful people.

We pray for Israelis, for Jews, for Palestinian Christians and for Muslims. We pray for peace, safety and justice and land for all.  
Today we remember them, and the millions like them, lest we forget.

But so much of what we try to recall today goes beyond words.  
We need moments of stillness and even just a couple of minutes of silence, of peace.  
Humanity still has much to learn about living in peace. In the past 3,500 years there have only been some 286 recorded years of peace in the world.

Yet, one thing that's clear in the Scriptures is that the nations do not lead people to peace; rather, people lead the nations to peace.  
And very often it is the young who change the world.

And so, as I speak today, I especially say to the young people here today – please learn from our mistakes. History has a habit of repeating itself – it has to, as no one ever listens.

But you can be different – you can listen.

- You can be a more tolerant and peaceful generation.
- You can seek forgiveness, truth and reconciliation and not revenge.
- You can be more moderate in your convictions.
- More welcoming to all.
- You can embrace difference.
- You can be the change we wish to see in our world.

Today, Remembrance Sunday, it is a day to remember that lives have been lost so that yours might be found. It is a day to remember, as our Gospel reading reminds us, that there is no greater sacrifice than that a life might be offered for the rescue of others. Few today, if any of us, knew any of the lads from this parish who gave their lives so that their home village might live in peace. And that is the challenge this village faces today: to be the place and people of peace, these young people died for.

If one of us shows love, our village is a more loving place.

If one of us forgives another, our community is a more forgiving.

If one of us prays for peace, the world is a more peaceful place.

I love those words of Desmond Tutu:

*"There will be peace on earth. I know it. The death and resurrection of Jesus puts it beyond doubt. Ultimately goodness and laughter and peace and compassion and joyfulness and forgiveness will have the last word."*

Jesus once said:

*"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God".*

Peace begins here, between ourselves,  
within our communities, within our schools,  
amongst our families, within our Civic Life,  
amongst our neighbours, and within our relationship with God.

So, let us today commit ourselves to be people of peace. Amen.