

Remembrance 2014-1914

A Sermon by Prof. William Horbury in S. Botolph's, Cambridge at Mattins, Sunday 26th October 2014

During this service a wreath was laid by Mrs. Margaret White, in memory of her great-uncle Philip Claud Harris of the Rifle Brigade. He is commemorated on the parish war memorial in S. Botolph's, and was killed in the defence of the Ypres Salient on 23rd October 1914, aged 20. His parental home was 14 Botolph Lane. The lessons at Mattins were Daniel 5 and Luke 12.35-40.

Daniel 5.5 In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote upon the plaster of the wall.

The writing on the wall! King Belshazzar's vision of the fingers of a hand came to him in the midst of his sacrilegious feast, and portended the fall of his empire. So Daniel showed him, saying: Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.

Looking back now to the year 1914, we see the newspaper headlines of the murder of the Austrian Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand in Bosnia as a kind of writing on the wall. Viewed at first as relatively insignificant, they stood out more and more as a writing on the wall, portending the fall of great empires — including those of Austria-Hungary, Germany, Turkey, and, after another generation, Britain too.

The sense of world-history and its mutability which comes to us as we hear the book of Daniel is therefore sharpened this year by the centenary of 1914. It is all the more valuable that here to-day the far-reaching imperial and global awareness brought by the centenary is traversed by attention to one individual who lived and died in 1914. The vast destiny of empire in the world war is matched by the incomprehensible vastness of the numbers of the fallen everywhere, so that even a small parish like our own has a long list.

To-day, however, we've been given a poignant glimpse of one name in the list: Philip Claud Harris, a man of twenty but a professional soldier (he joined up when he was fifteen), a man whose family home was 14 Botolph Lane, a man with parents to grieve for him and with a family who still think of him and are represented here to-day. Perhaps only through such glimpses of individuals does the vastness of what happened become meaningful to us.

This transition in our thought from the imperial and global to the individual is matched this morning by the transition from Daniel in the first lesson to the gospel in the second. Jesus teaches that not only world history as a whole, but also each individual participant in it, down to the least considered, is present to God. 'Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?' (Luke 12.6).

So in the parable of the watchful servants which follows (Luke 12.35-7) the returning master of the house thinks of the

servants as individual people, and in gratitude for their vigilance he asks them to sit down to eat while he himself serves them. He has in mind his whole vast household, just as the whole world and its empires are known to God; but, again as with the heavenly Father, he perceives each individual, however little they may normally be considered.

Richard Howlett Jones, who read this parable to us in the Second Lesson, is a lover of George Herbert's poetry. He may well have thought, as he read, of the way Herbert put this parable into verse in his poem beginning *Love bade me welcome*. I will serve, says the poet, as he glimpses the depth of divine love. You must sit down, says love in reply, and taste my meat. Then (says the poet) I did sit and eat.