

The 75th Anniversary of VE Day

This falls on the 8th May, which will be a bank holiday this year (instead of Monday 4th). We shall mark the anniversary on Sunday 10th at our 9.30 am service of Holy Communion at St Michael's and our 11.00 service of Holy Communion at St John's. Important events in our lives as individuals, - such as births, deaths and marriages – and such significant occasions in the life of our community and nation as the commemoration of VE Day are appropriately marked in Church. It is God Who makes sense of our lives. It is God upon Whom we depend for our lives. It is to God that we pray, God we thank, God Who supplies us with the wisdom we need in order to live our lives and God to Whom we confess our failures. We cannot do without God and it is vital that we acknowledge Him in all our ways. *For in him, we live, and move, and have our being.*

So I need to prepare a service and a sermon for the commemoration of VE Day and that is not as simple as it might appear. None of these things are – Remembrance Sunday, Battle of Britain Day and other similar dates in the calendar. War brings out the best and the worst in people. We are duty bound to honour the nobility of sacrifice while deprecating sadism. War is in itself a terrible thing, yet, if we believe that we are fighting in a just war, victory is something to celebrate, something even for which to pray and to thank God for if we achieve it. We go all out for victory, yet the people we are fighting – even if their cause is unjust – are still people, people like us. Good people fighting heroically in a noble cause are nevertheless constrained to kill and injure the enemy, to destroy the enemy's means of carrying on the war – roads and railways, munitions factories and even his home – and to take part in the general devastation and destruction which is the inevitable consequence of war. Hardship – famine and plague even - only too often follow from turning cornfields into battlefields, siege, movements of vast numbers of people, destruction of sanitary arrangements, disruption of water supplies and the general breakdown of order. Good men and women are put under extreme pressure to act in ways which are quite contrary to their true nature. How do we celebrate what is good without seeming to glorify what is evil?

Then there is the question of who is likely to be attending such services. Their numbers are becoming fewer, but there will be people there who remember the war or who at least were brought up with stories of family members who never came back and the hardships their parents' generation endured. There may well be currently serving military personnel and their families or people who have fought in conflicts which have occurred since 1945. These adults perhaps have terrible memories to think about, fallen comrades to remember, fathers, uncles, brothers who lost their lives fighting for our country. It might be important to them to sing the hymns and to say the prayers they grew up with or with which they are familiar from attending church parades. The sermon and the service need to honour them and their achievements and especially to show proper respect and gratitude to those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

There could be people present whose countries were on the other side in the conflicts we remember. We pray together for peace. We seek reconciliation and unity. But we also have to accept that the horrors of war are not something you can “just get over”, carelessly putting behind you suffering and sin. We do seek forgiveness – forgiveness for what we ourselves have done wrong and the grace to forgive what others have done to us – but forgiveness is not cheap or easy. The cost is measured in that Jesus gave His life that we might be forgiven. *Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.*

Most people alive in the world today who can remember the Second World must have been children in the years in which it was being fought. They will have memories of rationing, air raids, perhaps the deaths of schoolmates. Many of them will have been evacuated, living far from home with people they had not previously known. They may have been parted from their fathers for so long that they could hardly remember them and some of them never would have seen their fathers again, or their fathers might have come home broken men, unable to provide for their families. Adults would be working long hours with war work, fire-watching, home guard and similar in addition to their normal duties and therefore often tired. On the other hand, there was a lot of excitement, especially for children and more freedom to do their own thing, certainly much more than there is today. Nobody was not needed. Everybody mattered. There

was a strong common purpose to see it through and to come out on top. Those born in the war or immediately before it would never have known anything different.

I hope there will be many children at our services for the VE Day anniversary, but what to say to them? We need to tell them enough for them to understand how serious all this is, but not to give them nightmares. We have to enlist the up and coming generation in the cause of world peace. Sometimes, on Remembrance Sunday, I look from my prayer desk at all those young people, especially the teenagers, and think about how many of the lads who went out to fight in the two world wars were not very much older than these boys and girls are now. I pray, we all pray, that these young people will never experience anything like that.

From time to time, we clergy are asked to think about the issue of recruiting young people to the armed services. If we believe that there are times when a nation must be prepared to fight in a just cause and in its own defence, we do have to recruit the next generation of soldiers, sailors and airmen. It is an honourable profession. It has to be. If a country fills the ranks of its armed services with the dregs of humanity, war crimes are inevitable. To serve in the British armed forces is a great career choice for the right sort of young person. It can be a noble choice. There is a camaraderie, a goal, a purpose in life, an ultimate loyalty. There is training in physical and mental fitness. There are plenty of opportunities to develop skills and to learn, to play sport and to take up many kinds of stimulating activity. There are many good reasons for recommending our brightest and best young people to a military career. And yet we are putting them in a position where they might have to kill, or to be killed themselves. Nobody should ever have to be put in that position.

But, back to what should be in the service: a talk which explains the seriousness of what we are commemorating without terrifying the children; a talk which instils a proper sense of respect and gratitude for what other people have done on our behalf in ages past and are still doing overseas today; a commitment to take care of servicemen and women and their families, especially those who have been wounded or otherwise changed by the experience of battle, or who have lost those close to them in war; a commitment to work for peace in our own generation. But what else? For what ever reasons, we have not passed onto our children the hymns and prayers we grew up with, with which very often our parents and grandparents also grew up. In fact, most children and young adults today know very few hymns and prayers. They may feel that they do not belong at our service if we only have the music of fifty and a hundred years ago, but, older people might feel that there is something missing if we do not, or that some of the more child-friendly songs and choruses lack the gravitas required by such a solemn occasion. I have been forced to compromise and I hope the whole community of every age will feel at home in our Church which is there for everybody who lives here, not just for me or for those who attend every week. If we are open-minded, however old or young we are, we can recognise that there is good in the old and the new. It is no accident that one of the most successful hymnbooks ever published is called *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. Jesus said: *Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.*

So, what of war? In the Bible, there is the story of David and Goliath. Goliath was the champion of the Philistine army. He was a huge man and an accomplished warrior. He challenged the entire Israelite army to put forward one man who would fight him. David was a shepherd boy and he was the only Israelite ready to take up Goliath's challenge. Goliath was clad in armour, carried a sword and a spear, and he had a magnificent shield born before him. David wore the clothes of a shepherd boy and was armed with a slingshot. David first knocked out Goliath with a slung stone and then he killed the mighty warrior with Goliath's own sword. David was brave. He was smarter than Goliath, using a weapon which could strike his adversary while his enemy could not get to him. David had God on his side. Instinctively, we admire David and we may well want to be like him. If the Israelites had succumbed to the Philistines, quite possibly their culture and religion, everything the Jews have contributed to the human story, would have been lost for ever. The Philistines worshipped a fish! It was to Israel that the LORD initially revealed Himself in the Law and the Prophets as the one true God, Who created heaven and earth, Who sustains

every one of us on our life's journey, Who guides and supports us in all the challenges we face, and Who has prepared at His side a place for all people of all nations (including the Philistines) who turn to Him in faith. *And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.* Had the Philistines won that battle, no doubt many Israelites would have been killed, their wives raped, their goods pillaged, their homes plundered and destroyed.

Nazism was an evil. Its advance appeared to be inexorable. Many people at the start of the Second World War saw a parallel with the bible story. Britain was David standing up to the Philistine Nazis and, of course, eventually we (and our allies in the Empire and Commonwealth, the US, the USSR, etc.) overcame the evil empire. We are right to be thankful that we did and modern Germans and the present day citizens of the countries which were then the Nazis' allies are as grateful as we are. Thank God for the defeat of fascism.

And yet we surely feel that there must be a better way than to kill the enemy's soldiers, to bomb his cities. Jesus is the descendant of David, *great David's greater son*. Can we imagine Jesus slaying Goliath or firing a machine gun into a platoon of enemy soldiers or dropping bombs on an enemy city? Is it unrealistic to want to follow Jesus rather than to copy David? Wouldn't David be of more use than Jesus if we were under attack by an evil power? Following Jesus would certainly be very costly and very risky.

This thought brings me back to the other aspect of our services on 10th May. As well as hymns and prayers, bible readings and a sermon, they will be celebrations of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is the service which Jesus told us to perform. Holy Communion remembers that God the Father gave His own Son to die for His people. Holy Communion is about self-sacrifice. It proclaims forgiveness to all those who come with penitent hearts in faith. Holy Communion affirms our brotherhood – with Jesus and with one another. It is the Sacrament of brotherly love. Holy Communion is about unwavering, whole-hearted commitment. The Bread and Wine of Holy Communion are a promise and a foretaste of our eternal life in Christ. Holy Communion proclaims the coming of God's Kingdom, His Kingdom of justice, mercy and peace. Holy Communion is Jesus yesterday, today and forever.

There are many things to consider about when we think about war - which brings out the best and the worst in people and so drastically determines the course of human history for good and ill. Many of these issues are too deep for me to resolve and, no doubt, for you too. I am sure, however, that their final resolution is in the Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ (*God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds : and Man of the substance of his Mother, born in the world*), the story we tell at Easter and experience weekly (if we accept His invitation) in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Whatever happens to us and to the world we live in, we cling onto Him in faith. He will not let us down. Roger.