

## **THOUGHTS OF THE 75<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF VE DAY MAY 8<sup>TH</sup> 2020**

Seventy five years on from the end of the Second World War, remembering is still important. But this anniversary also gives us the chance to reflect on the lessons of war and to catch again the vision of what might be. In the midst of the very particular anxieties of 2020, we can consider those qualities of life which, in our complex and perplexing world, prove to be life-giving, qualities Jesus calls blessed.

As the years roll on, more and more of us have no personal memory of the conflict which so dominated the life of this nation, the life of Europe, and of the whole world 75 years ago. Those who are old enough to remember will, no doubt, have different things in mind today. Some will have memories of celebrations to mark the end of war in Europe. Others may remember the strange business of meeting a man whom they had never seen before who was their father, and whose return home had to be accommodated into the family life they had known up to that moment, others cannot but remember those who died in war. Yet others will remember liberation from occupation and oppression.

All of us can honour those who risked their lives and gave their lives. And for all of us remembrance is important because it is the gateway to peace-making.

Peace-making has to consider the past – the recent as well as the ancient past - because, as one writer put it, “The past is not dead and gone: it isn’t even past.” (William Faulkner). It shapes us still.

Twenty-five ago a service was held in Carlisle Cathedral to mark the fiftieth Anniversary of the end of the Second World War. It was broadcast on television. The question of forgiveness was a live issue at the time in the press and, because the service here had a high profile, some of that debate focused on the Carlisle service. Colonel Terry Hodgson had been invited, as someone who served with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Border Regiment in India and Burma in the war, to give a 50 anniversary Tribute to fallen comrades. The question was: Would he say he forgave those at whose hands he had suffered during the war?

Some of those being interviewed at the time were saying that they found that it was too much to be expected to forgive those who had committed dreadful acts in the course of this tragic war. But Colonel Hodgson did pray for strength to forgive his former enemies – he did pray that he had strength to move on. It was a prophetic word; a word which had its part in beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.

Laurens van der Post writes eloquently on this same theme. He served with the commandos in the Second World War and was a Japanese prisoner of war. He

writes about the way that forgiveness allows us to face up to the past, respond to it, and deal with it. Without forgiveness we can be trapped. To forgive is not to forget. We forgive and remember - and learn from our experience.

Without forgiveness at the personal level, hurts go unchecked, and we recycle failures, resentments, bitterness and mistrusts in our lives. Without forgiveness there can be no real peace and no lasting reconciliation. Without forgiveness at work in society, we are caught up in the same negativity, trapped by bitterness and unable to move on to seek the good not of one party or interest group, but the good of all.

It is understandable that we ask ourselves the question: Doesn't forgiveness undermine justice in some way? One wise scholar of the bible said this:

“As author of justice, God loves justice. But even more he loves human beings and their restoration to just relationships. In so far as forgiveness requires the identification and condemnation of behaviour that has alienated two or more parties to a conflict, it safeguards the majesty of the law.”

The twin city arrangements between Flensburg, Slupsk and Carlisle are a powerful and lively expression of the new understandings that have grown between the nations over the last two generations. They help us celebrate all that has been achieved in international understanding, all that ensures that the

nations will have, and will use, more excellent ways of resolving conflict and disagreement. There is nothing automatic about progress towards peace or progress towards justice in our world. Both must continually be ventured.

The Cathedral stands in our city as a place made sacred by prayer, a place where believing, hoping and loving are nurtured. It is here that talk about sacrifice and the cost of achieving just and true relationships must be set alongside the belief that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved. It is here that any talk about human forgiveness must be set alongside the creative word of forgiveness Jesus uttered on the cross: Father forgive. These words 'Father forgive' are famously in place in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, they are both the touchstone of God's way with humankind and an expression of what proves to be formative for our life together.

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