

A Thought for Remembrance Day

by Diana Johnson

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

St Mary and St Michael, Trumpington



8th November 2020 - Locked Down Remembrance Service

Dear friends, it says in 1 John 4:7: (NIV)

'let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.' **Amen.**

Much is said on this Remembrance Day of the World Wars. In the Second World War, people were sure they were fighting an evil which threatened civilisation. All we have learned since has made it clear that it was much worse than it was known at the time. This country, and many others, was fighting for no selfish ends, but for freedom to reject evil.

When that war ended, there was a determination that such things should never, ever happen again in Europe. And so the peace began.

Maintaining peace requires constant vigilance in every country. This is nowhere more apparent, nor more poignantly illustrated, than at the site of the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. I want to take you there in your minds this morning, for a reason. I well remember one visit, alone and early in the morning when the snow lay fresh on the ground, my silent footfalls making tracks in the snow past mass graves with simple descriptions: 9,000 dead; 6,000 dead; 8,000 dead...The light was grey and the woods around the place bare and silent in their winter stillness.

Today, it is a place of memorial, the mass graves are grassy mounds, and sometimes it requires an effort of imagination to recall the horrors that were perpetrated there. It serves to allow people to remember their friends; and to remind us, who are younger, what happened in that place.

But there is another aspect. For it is not a peaceful place. Gunfire, especially the roar of high velocity tank guns, echoes around the site. For Bergen-Hohne is a NATO training camp, well known to generations of Cold warriors, where the troops of NATO member countries – Germany, Netherlands, Britain and Belgium – exercise regularly. Today there are firing ranges on the training area for main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. In addition there are artillery fire positions; small arms ranges, and ranges for hand-held anti-tank weapons, as well as air defence training facilities, villages to practise fighting in built-up areas, deep wading points and bivouac sites.

Why? Well, for that answer, we must consider that it is always the time for vigilance. Theirs was, and still is, a task of vigilance, and the success of that vigilance was what allowed me, and many of you here today, to be brought up in peace. So the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen illustrates two vital things: the need to recall why the sacrifices we remember today were made; and the need to ensure that what was won, is not subsequently lost. And that is a task we cannot, and should not,

leave to our young warriors, women and men, while carrying on without further thought and omitting to give some direction and focus to their vigilance. So let's think about it now.



We must remember the lessons of reconciliation on which our peace is based.

Above all, as the Church we must never allow the world at large to forget that this is God's world. Two Christian teachings seem to me to be fundamental as we hand on the torch to the next generation, and teach our children.

They are love of our neighbours, and forgiveness.

Love of others is fashionable, and well supported by the idealism of our young people. But this week's news from, well, anywhere really, or the news in any other week for that matter, reminds us that there is always a need – an imperative - to keep telling the world of our Gospel of love. And to keep it in people's minds by our personal example.

Yet above all, it is Christ's message of forgiveness which the world needs to hear. This is not fashionable. People everywhere demand their rights; justice; compensation; and revenge; but do not offer forgiveness. It seems that forgiveness is hardly understood as a sensible course of action in the world of those who, and I say this in quotation marks, who, "know how to get on in life."

The reconciliation on which our peace has lasted for 70 years came about by forgoing compensation and revenge at the end of the Second World War, and instead offering forgiveness. On the part of the warring nations and perhaps especially by the French, who had suffered 3 invasions from Germany in the preceding 70 years.

It was Jesus who taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." We [will pray] these words today. Do we really want forgiveness so much that we are prepared to offer the same to others? Are we really prepared to act, indeed, as we are commanded to do in the Bible? To forgive?

In forgiveness, we can best pay tribute to the personal friends we have lost in conflicts over the years, for me, I carry their names with me every Remembrance Sunday [hold up].

And, beyond those known to us, in forgiveness we can pay tribute to the great mass of people who were killed in wars, but who are unknown to us - all of whom were loved by someone, somewhere here in this world. They were loved by God, too; for they were part of His creation. We can celebrate their contribution to the defeat of evil, and thank them for the peace we have had for so long here in this country. And in remembering, we are reminded to be vigilant against evil in our own time.

We thank God for these people, and give God the glory that out of the undoubted evil that is war, he has the strength, and the love, to bring great good. And new life. What we do with that new life is down to us, here, today. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...

Amen.

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