

Fear no evil

Psalm 23; Acts 9:36-43

The VE Day commemorative events over the last few days have been inspiring, thought-provoking, fun and moving. As the King said in a speech, we should not forget what the men and women did for our country, and the world, 80 years ago.

8th May was celebrated as VE Day but in truth there was a cascade of surrenders around those days in 1945. Berlin fell on 7th May. The final surrender was meant to be kept secret as the Soviet leader Stalin wanted the date and time to be one minute passed midnight on 9th May. However, all secrecy was blown away by the fact that a German radio broadcast news of the surrender on 7th May, so the formal day was settled on the 8th.

The lights came on again all over the world. The first weather forecast was broadcast since September 1939, as weather forecasting had been secret information since it may have been used to aid enemy invasion. They needn't have worried. The official forecast broadcast on 8th May 1945 was for rain. They got it wrong. It was gloriously sunny. Forecasting continued its long tradition of being a notch below horoscope predictions.

Attitudes to war, then and now, were mixed. Most volunteered and helped in many different ways; some refused. Some were heroes, some simply did their duty, and others struggled with the psychological as well as physical impact of warfare at home and abroad. King George VI in his speech to the nation said, *"Let us remember those who are not with us at this moment of rejoicing."* Our war memorials in Church testify to those who died. And of course, the War in the Far East would rumble on for several more months, its end illuminated by the devastating light of two atomic bombs. Their explosion brought another era of fear into the world which has not gone

away as many of us have lived through periods of cold and hot war since then. It is terrifying to think that both India and Pakistan, currently in conflict, are nuclear powers.

Psalm 23 speaks into the heart of the human condition and has been doing so for well over two millennia. In it God promises to be present effectively and compassionately to bless and keep, to guide and direct, to nourish and nurture, to discipline and redeem. The metaphor of the Lord as shepherd is pastoral, political, and personal. While ancient Near Eastern rulers were often pictured with a mace (the rod) and a shepherd's crook (the staff) as official symbols, the shepherd of Psalm 23 is One Who gets alongside, as well as rules over. One Who embodies hospitality and inclusive protection, as well as travelling with those He loves into the darkest of places.

And in such places, because of His presence, we need, 'fear no evil', or 'fear no adversity', or 'fear no ill', or 'fear no harm.' Not that evil and adversity and ill-will and arm aren't real, but that they, in the 'rightness' of God's love and the goodness of God's aspiration for all of us, will not have an eternal hold over us. No matter how often evil manifests, forming and re-forming, in old ways or new ways, God's intention, with us, is to overcome it.

I've often wondered what these words would have meant when sung by people in blitzed Clydebank, or Coventry, or London, or Dresden. I've often wondered what these words would have meant for those at Hiroshima or Nagasaki, or Berlin, or Leningrad. What do these words mean today for people living in Ukraine, or Jerusalem, or Gaza, where they are sung. Or India and Pakistan. 'Fear no evil'. What do these words mean for women and men living in physically and emotionally violent relationships? 'Fear no evil'. What do these words mean for the child victims of abuse? 'Fear no evil'. What do these words mean to those going hungry or thirsty or homeless, for those addicted to drugs, or alcohol, or sex, or gambling? 'Fear no evil'.

In World War II and in every generation before, and in every generation since, evil is around. Few are heroes and heroines, though many do heroic things. And they are afraid. Desmond Tutu once said, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to act despite it." Fearing no evil does not mean that fear isn't real, or that evil isn't real. It is how we deal with it that is real. Also what follows on after that verse in the Psalm. "...fear no evil...for **Thou** art with me..." In the face of evil in a time of war, in the face of evil in our time today, "...**Thou** art with me..." God is with us, not in a partisan way, not in a 'sit-back- and-I'll-deal-with-it-without-you-way', but in an encouraging way, sometimes a warning way, but always a hopeful way. God is **with** us when we face evil; God will help us, as best we are able, to face down evil, and to overcome it.

In the commemoration of VE Day, it is not simply a remembrance of overcoming an enemy, it is a sense of a victory over a particular evil so that something better, more wholesome, more beautiful, more liberating, might come. The fight was not just *against* something, it was *for* something. It was *for* a vision of a better world, a land fit for heroes. At the time of World War Two, Winston Churchill said, *"Success is not final; failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts."* Fearing no evil means constantly confronting evil and doing our best to overcome evil so that something better might come. It may be piecemeal. It may be incomplete. But it must be the best that we can do in our time in order to hand on something better to the generations to come.

What do we need to fight **against**, and to fight **for**, in our world today? We don't have to look far, and we are sadly spoiled for choice. In the English local elections, a week ago, Dame Andrea Jenkyns, the new mayor of Greater Lincolnshire said: *"Now that Reform (UK) is in a place of power, we can help start rebuilding Britain. Inch by inch, Reform will reset Britain to its glorious past....I*

say no to putting people in hotels. Tents are good enough for France, they should be good enough for here in Britain."

Which 'glorious past' would that be? The miserable, xenophobic, small-minded, mean-spirited past? The UK equivalent of 'Make America Great Again' past? Not the one that welcomed in refugees before, during and after World War II. Not, I believe, what brave individuals sacrificed life for so that this petty-minded, insular short-termism might take root in British politics. I cannot comprehend what the question is if people think that this is the answer. A policy smacking of the 'let's build a wall, let's deport people we don't like, let's tariff the world away from our shoulders and create a ring of fiscal and military steel around us' that is at the heart of President policies. Strangling his own country, and strangling the world. Is that what we want for our country? There is an evil to be feared, and one to be overcome with something much better.

VE Day commemorations reminded me that those who chose to stand up and be counted fought not to serve the past but to secure the present and to enable the future. They fought in this country for a better society for a greater number of people, where freedom and responsibility were yoked to compassion and kindness. This was not without its flaws, or without a need to adapt and refresh and sustain it; but a vision that on seeing unjust walls, sought to knock them down; a vision that on seeing gulfs of inequality and human need, sought to build bridges. And it still does.

In a world where there is still evil, we need fear no evil because God is with us. Prodding us, nudging us, pushing us, dragging us forward, never leaving us alone until we make our world better than it currently is. Reminding us of what it could be - not a glorious past - which might not have been that glorious if history teaches us anything - but a brighter future - at which and

for which we must still work. For people of faith, fearing no evil, walking and working with God, that is what we work towards, in big ways and in small ways, daily.

At the start of his papacy, Pope Leo reminded not just the Roman Catholic Church but the whole world about what the consequences of fearing no evil because God is with us means: *"God loves us, God loves you all, and evil will not prevail! All of us are in God's hands. So, let us move forward, without fear, together, hand in hand with God and with one another other! We are followers of Christ. Christ goes before us. The world needs His light. Humanity needs Him as the bridge that can lead us to God and His love. Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace."*

For a Pope, for Presbyterians, for everyone, and for us reminded by VE Day commemoration. Don't just fight **against** something, but **for** something, and fear no evil. For Thou art with us.

Thou, Thou, Thou.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen