



Archbishop Justin Welby preached this sermon at the service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey marking the 70th anniversary of Victory in Europe.

The service was attended by veterans and their families, representatives of Allied nations and Commonwealth countries who fought alongside Britain in the conflict, and senior government and military representatives.

Isaiah 56:6-9a, 11-12; Psalm 107:1-16; Romans 8:31-39

May I speak in the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

On the 26 May 1940, with the Government sitting here in this very Abbey, in the same way as those in the Psalm we just sung, across the country we cried to God in our trouble. Churchill wrote of the campaign in May-June 1940:

"Now at last the slowly-gathered, long pent-up fury of the storm broke upon us. Four or five millions of men met each other in the first shock of the most merciless of all the wars of which record has been kept. ... Within six weeks we were to find ourselves alone, almost disarmed... with the whole of Europe open to Hitler's power..."

And he continued, writing of the situation in 1945: "The contrast was certainly remarkable. The road across these five years was long, hard and perilous. Those who perished upon it did not give their lives in vain. Those who marched forward to the end will always be proud to have trodden it with honour."

And now we gather again, 70 years on, thankful for victory over the greatest darkness of the twentieth century, perhaps of all history. Our gratitude is not simply for victory-in-Europe, but also reconciliation-in-Europe that followed, neither obviously nor automatically. Peace is more than the end of war: reconciliation dismantles the hostilities which previously separated and alienated us from one another and from God.

In November 1940 Coventry was terribly bombed. The fires lit the skies for miles, so many people died and were wounded, and amongst much else, the Cathedral burned. Yet from the next day the Provost of Coventry, the Very Reverend Richard Howard, set a course towards reconciliation and the dismantling of hostility.

Six weeks later, on Christmas Day 1940, he gave a sermon on the BBC, in which he said: "we want to tell the world... that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge... We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler - a more Christ-child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife."

The peace for which we give thanks today – 70 years of the greatest peace in Western Europe since the departure of the Roman legions – remains an ongoing project of reconciliation in that world of which he spoke, not only for us but as a gift to our world, where conflict and extremism destroy hope, devastate prosperity, vanquish aspiration to a better life.

Isaiah speaks of how we meet that challenge to build a more Christ-child-like world of peace and hope. He gives a great and inspiring call to all of us who have received much, such a great deliverance, to be those who give much. He calls us by sacrifice and determination to be those who raise up the foundations of many generations, who repair the breach and restore paths of peace and justice so that, as he says, "our light shall spring up like the dawn and our healing shall spring up quickly".

And Paul, in that beautiful Second Reading, in words of fire and hope, reveals the foundations of our call to transform a world of war, to share the deliverance that we have received. Yes, he says, there will be struggle and sacrifice, they have been there before and how gratefully we remember today those who gave everything in those years.

But in the struggle against the darkness of cruelty and conflict, in the struggle for reconciliation, nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ. Firmly held by his love we will overcome all fear, prevail over all discouragement, live our vocation to be still a nation of inspiration and generosity, of reconciliation, of blessing to our world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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