**Sermon: What sort of Victory?**

**by Revd Rowan Williams Sunday 10th May 2020**

History textbooks and history lessons at school often give you the feeling that events naturally divide themselves up into neat packages: ancient Rome, the Middle Ages, the Victorian era, the Second World War and so on, where the beginnings and endings are clear. You turn the page and something different starts. Real history, like real life, very seldom works like that. For us in Britain, the Second World War began on a certain date in September 1939; but if we'd been living in Central or Eastern Europe, even more if we'd been part of a Jewish family in Germany, this date would have been just one moment in a story of trauma and suffering that had started many years earlier.

And so too with the end of the war. VE Day marks the decisive end of one set of conflicts, but those celebrating it in 1945 knew very well that many were still suffering and struggling in the Far East. And perhaps even more than this, they knew that ahead of them lay the massive task of reconstructing the society they lived in? In Britain but also throughout Europe. At this distance of time, we can forget just how much needed to be rebuilt, literally and metaphorically; the years immediately after the war were years that saw an unprecedented number of people worldwide displaced - homeless and landless, uncertain where if anywhere they could put down roots. And something in the sheer experience of sharing suffering and loss had made it impossible just to go back to square one and continue as if nothing had happened.

Too many people had been through an experience that changed for ever their view of the world. There was a new urgency about letting more and more people have the care and security they deserved - those people who had carried the weight of hard work and high risk in the war, at home or abroad. There was a new sense too, especially among those who had been present at the liberation of the death camps of the Third Reich, that human nature had been revealed at its very worst; part of the task ahead was to build trustworthy institutions, in and between the nations of the world, so as to limit the possibilities of insane cruelty and murderous bigotry ever getting the upper hand again in the life of human societies.

This is what the human world is like: no tidy beginnings and endings? But all the same, moments of clarity and insight, where we see the scale of the challenge we face. Our reading from St Paul speaks of the promise that this fragile human world will one day be caught up into the endless glory of God and will be held securely in God's hands for ever. But this is not a moment that has already arrived in all its fullness in our history. We know about the promise because of the reality of Jesus' resurrection, the new life God has brought into being out of the worst of human injustice and human pain. But what this means is not an instant triumphant conclusion to history but a fresh commitment to work in the light of the promise we have glimpsed, confident that what we do has meaning because it is at one with the purposes of God.

In 1945, many, especially those with political power, recognised with a new force and conviction that the people who had done so much undramatic but essential work in wartime needed a proper recognition of their human needs and their human dignity. And if we start drawing the obvious parallels with where we are today, we can say that when this particular pandemic is over it will be time first to recognise with gratitude all those who have been doing the undramatic and necessary work, in all kinds of public service; and then to start thinking about how such people ought to be honoured and protected in society - how carers of all sorts deserve better support, how those doing routine jobs of public importance can have more security for themselves and their families.

As we've already been reminded today, this is the bicentenary of Florence Nightingale's birth; part of her abiding significance is the way she gave professional dignity to those who worked on the medical front line in times of war and crisis - and we have never forgotten this legacy. And then in addition to all this, when we emerge from our own current crisis, it will be time to think also of those entire societies or nations that are inadequately protected from disease and disaster, and to ask what they need and deserve.

Will we try to go back to square one? Or have we experienced enough shared struggle and loss to make us really want to change things? Our faith does not tell us that, if we work hard, things are bound to get better very soon and we can put all serious problems behind us for good. What it does say is simply that what we do out of an urgent sense of what is due to human beings made in God's image is not in vain: it is upheld by and absorbed into the eternal purpose of a God who uses all that we can offer him for the spread of human healing and the honouring of human dignity.

Today's commemoration reminds us that while there are great watershed moments, there are no quick fixes in human history. We need strength and imagination for that stubborn, steady work of rebuilding? rebuilding a society's health and stability, rebuilding so as to honour all its members and to recognise how much we depend on the matter-of-fact skill and patience of so many, rebuilding a world that offers all God's children the promise of a life that is just and safe. The good news of the resurrection tells us that nothing we do for the sake of our fellow human beings is lost since God's eternal purpose is healing and life; and because of this we can ?stand firm?. Our victory is not a once and for all triumph of human effort: it is the recognition that at the root of all things, all our acts and thoughts and hopes, lies a healing compassion that can never be extinguished. Thanks be to God who gives us this kind of victory.