

VE Day Service - 10 May 2015 at Leamington Spa War Memorial

As we've been hearing on the news this week, over a million people gathered in London 70 years ago to celebrate. The current Queen and her sister, Princess Margaret, slipped out of the Palace and mingled with the crowds, caught up in the atmosphere of jubilation. Winston Churchill addressed the nation, allowing a brief time of rejoicing. Although war continued in the Far East, and Japan had not yet surrendered, Europe was at last free from the organised evil of genocide and violence which had blighted the recent past. It was time to proclaim Victory in Europe: the crushing of Nazism after six long years of war. Thank God. Thank those who had given their lives. Thank all whose courage and service had brought about this day.

The war had been won. Celebrations were in order. The relief of the population was palpable. But winning the war was not the end of the task. Winning the peace was the next challenge.

Winning the peace meant working on several fronts. Establishing effective Governments. Rebuilding shattered communities, nations, economies. Liberating and caring for those in death camps. Bringing war criminals to justice. Reconciling bitterly divided nations. And as time went on, creating and strengthening institutions to bind former enemies together and invest in a shared future: the Council of Europe; the United Nations.

All of this would take place against a backdrop of austerity and rationing; the British people would make sacrifices for the peace effort for far longer than they'd made sacrifices for the war effort. It wasn't easy to live through an era of belt-tightening, notwithstanding the spirit of the Blitz and the sense that everyone was in it together. But these were sacrifices for hope, not for survival; and they were made to ensure that scarce resources and hardship alike would be shared, as the transition was made to the rebuilding of prosperity and peace.

A remarkable thing emerged from this background of hardship. Generosity, refined through years of war, was extended not only to the neighbourhood and the nation, but to former enemies too. British and Irish churches collected for the needs of refugees in Europe, irrespective of their faith or nationality - the beginning of Christian Aid Week. It was a recognition that winning the peace wasn't about ourselves only; it wasn't about selfish, insular nationalism. Winning the peace meant reaching out to others to ensure they too could have life and hope. The people of this land knew that this was right, and they gave generously to lift the poorest out of poverty.

Winning the war is an event, an event we can mark on the calendar and remember at anniversaries such as this. It took enormous courage, commitment and sacrifice, largely on the part of the few. For that, we should all still be thankful; it has given us the freedom to be who we are, and it has given us the opportunity to work to win the peace.

Winning the peace, by contrast, is a process; a process in which it's right for us all to participate together; a process which never ends, but which requires our commitment and our efforts day after day, year after year, in the service of what's right and good. We failed to win the peace after World War 1; the wounds of Europe were left raw and bleeding; grievances and resentments festered; violence erupted once again. It's a pattern we still see in many parts of the world today.

But hope comes when the hand of generosity is extended; when the hand of reconciliation is offered; when we realise, powerful and powerless alike, that our deepest interests are one and the same - and commit to work together for the common good.

We won the war. Thank God. Thank those who gave their lives. Thank all whose courage and service brought us this day to celebrate.

And now, let's work again to win the peace.