

## V-E Day 1945 – and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary

I think Dave asked me to contribute on this topic because I was, so to speak, ‘there’ at the time, and he self-evidently wasn’t. And, whereas at an earlier point in my life, everyone around me except the very youngest had known the war at firsthand, now you have to be 85 for a clear recollection and nearly 100 to be an ex-serviceman or servicewoman (the Queen just slipped into uniform in the WAAC in the last year of the War). But my being nearly 11 years old when VE Day came doesn’t of itself qualify me to tackle deeper questions which arise. Of the actual surrender my own memories are not so much of the one special day, because I don’t think in my road we had street parties, and my father was still in the armed forces (he was over 50 and was therefore going to be demobilized in July), and, of course, there was no TV, so there were only the newspapers for pictures of crowds outside Buckingham Palace, and I think they came the next morning. So my boyish recollections are partly of relaxations which had started slightly before the end of the War – for instance, the return of ice-cream (there had been none since 1940 – wonderful to taste) and car headlights coming back into use (that felt like a new era) – and partly external, and in particular I remember the headlines from nine days before, ‘Hitler Dead’, and we knew it was virtually over. One small memento I still have is the letter the King sent to all schoolchildren.

But wars create big moral problems with which the combatants have to wrestle (unless of course, like the Romans of old, and Hitler of our time, they are actually glorifying war – or at least while they are winning it). Christians, who long to see disputes resolved with outcomes that are both just and peaceable, find themselves wrestling in conscience not only about particular conflicts, but also about whether any use of harmful force is ever justified. Does not ‘you shall not kill’ apply universally? I have been through that wrestling myself (in the days when I was called up to be a soldier in the post-War years), but have concluded (uneasily, I admit) that unjustified attacks by force by one country upon another, a weaker country, do justify an armed response and also require third parties to come to the armed defence of the victim. Hitler and Mussolini traded upon the readiness of surrounding democracies to appease them (and even to make a virtue of doing so – ‘Peace in our Time’); and thus the dictators’ arrogance grew, and their successes, both diplomatic and military, encouraged them to ever greater outrages. Any policing may at times require the use of force (though it has to be very carefully constrained), and international policing may equally at times require it also.

So, yes, it was right that we were at war with Hitler; and it was correspondingly a great cause for thanksgiving when it was over. My impression is that in World War I, the conviction that we were fighting God’s cause was shared throughout the country – even the pulpits rang with it. After World War II there was relief and gratitude that the conflict was over, but perhaps not quite so strong a sense of the fight having been God’s. But perhaps in the earlier war there had more dependence upon God, but also there had been still a great belief that the British Empire had been raised up by God as a special instrument of his purposes, and some of that conviction had diminished by 1945. Indeed in the years following 1945 the

dismantling of our colonial empire along with our post-war economic frailty should have undeceived us; we were not, we are not, entitled to any inflated notion of our having a special place in God's sun, simply through being British. One of the problems arising from winning a war is the puff it gives to self-serving nationalism – history is written by the victors, and you know in whose interest they write it. But what a joy now to see a Germany which has recovered from a harsh exclusive nationalism to become both civilized and strongly internationalist. I

Retrospect on World War II also raises questions of how a country fights a war. Everyone knows that truth is one of the first victims of war – each side in a war is engaged in propaganda; every kind of deceit is adopted as simply means which are subordinated to the ends; anything is justified by the test of whether it contributes to victory. Violence too becomes valuable – not only in shooting down attacking aircraft, but by going far beyond in bombing German cities (the most notable instance was the fire-bombing which destroyed Dresden in February 1945, when there was no military need for it). War had come to include whole societies – anyone in a nation at war might suffer loss of home, goods, family or life at no notice and for no reason save that they belonged to that nation. Yes, there were residual moral constraints on our side – we did not starve or torture prisoners of war; we were not trying to increase our Empire by coercion; the BBC was generally consistent in 'telling it the way it was' and was valued round the world for that; and we were concerned (no doubt partly for self-regarding reasons) that the defeated nations should be able to recover physically, but also politically, from the depths to which they had been driven. So far, perhaps slightly better than it might have been.

But within a few years an almost unprecedented new question arose. Can we be sure our government is fighting on the right side? There were not many doubts about fighting communist rebels in Malaya after 1945; there was little hesitation about involvement with the United Nations resistance to the invasion of South Korea by the North in 1950; but the problem became acute when Anthony Eden quite improperly invaded Egypt in 1956, and the country was split. And the split was even more dangerous as the British armed forces included vast numbers of young men doing National Service, and they were bumping up against the issue of whether a soldier is under blind obedience, or whether even a conscript may have a personal conscience. In my own later life, I am glad to have had a chance to join the House of Bishops in their protest to Tony Blair in late 2002 that to invade Iraq would lower the threshold of war below what our consciences would stand. But I am aware that such a protest could have been placing individual soldiers – particularly Christian ones – into an appalling dilemma. Soldiers are not supposed to be free to pick and choose which wars they will fight, but equally, are they to be locked into unquestioning obedience?

We live in a world where not only may we be victims to a silent all-pervading virus, but one also where human sin is aggravated by poverty and need on the one hand and by greed and selfishness on the other. When individuals die young of disease or when the innocent are mugged, we see on a small scale what on a large scale whole nations have been suffering in the Middle East and in Africa; in either case there will be those to say 'How could God allow

this?'. There is no simple knock-down answer to that question, but it is a good starting-point to look at history and recognize both that the world has been in rebellion against God, and yet we genuinely give thanks for his hand in the deliverance we had in 1945. We hold that alongside our awareness that God never was by sheer omnipotence running an earthly society in his own image of justice and love – that is a heavenly prospect, the heavenly prospect. That doesn't mean we simply shrug and say 'That's how it is', for, no, it doesn't let us off any hooks; as disciples of Christ we recognize the heavenly prospect as our charter for our present years here: 'Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven'.