

***+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.***

Last Thursday the world commemorated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dropping of the first atomic bomb in a war on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. This event killed around 140 000 people, 70 000 immediately by the blast, tens of thousands from radiation burns and diseases over the coming weeks, months and years. And three days later, on the 9<sup>th</sup> August 1945 a second bomb exploded over Nagasaki destroying that city with many more tens of thousands killed. Two weeks later Japan surrendered, and World War II ended. With the destruction of these two cities the world entered the nuclear age and a new sense of fearfulness became part of everyday human life.

The ethical questions about the dropping of the bombs have long since been argued. Was the cost worth it? Did the quick end save more lives? Would there have been as many as one million casualties if America invaded Japan to halt the hostilities, as was predicted? We will never know. And even in this year of 2020, 75 years on from Hiroshima Day, eight countries still have nuclear weapons. Although there have been many tests of the weapons over the years since the end of World War II, an atomic bomb has not again been used as a weapon of war. There is a strong pacifist movement in Japan itself and a commitment to oppose the use of atomic weapons.

As one news commentator reported however, the context of the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are rarely mentioned. Many atrocities happened on both sides in the time between the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the dropping of the bombs in Japan. Neither the United States nor Japan are vindicated in those years. Death and destruction lay in the wake of these warring nations. And sometimes it takes an immensely powerful and world-stopping event to change the course of human history. Such an event happened 75 years ago in Japan. The human world stopped for a while to witness and reflect, before they began to celebrate – at least in the West, and the Earth recoiled in horror at the magnitude of destruction. And God... Do you ever wonder how God felt during the war?

When human beings commit atrocities does God feel like Jacob (Israel) the father of Joseph would have felt when the brothers conspired to kill the young Joseph, threw him into a pit, thought better of murder, then sold him into slavery? Did God weep like Jacob would have wept? Does God continue to weep today when atrocities continue to be committed? What did we learn from Hiroshima and Nagasaki? What did we learn from the horror of a world at war? Perhaps all we learned was that human beings are capable of terrible things.

World-changing times stop all of us in our tracks. It stopped Japan and they turned around, at least some of them, from the pursuit of war to the pursuit of peace. And today Japan is an immensely developed nation, technologically advanced and still culturally distinct. As I think about the war in which my parents grew up, in the middle of London during the Blitz, amid the fear and turmoil of a city facing destruction and occupation, I wonder how that city, let alone the rest of the world, recovered. Most of us here just don't know what it was like. Most of us cannot imagine buildings toppling around us, bodies in the street, civic icons there one day and gone the next. It is no wonder that decades later there is still a strength of spirit in those who lived through the war.

And it is those older people today who show courage and strength in the middle of this pandemic. When everything seems uncertain those people who lived through the war reflect a resilience that is inspiring to others. The example of veteran Tom Moore who at the age of 99 walked 100 laps of his garden on his walking frame to raise 16 million pounds, which is the equivalent of \$30 million for the British National Health Service helps we today realise that our predecessors have lived through vast changes and have survived to create a new world.

I looked at some images of the commemorative services in Peace Park in Hiroshima to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Each year the park is usually packed with people. This year the service was small with limited people able to attend, widely spaced seats and everyone wearing masks. The scene describes the year 2020. It is a year in which people

everywhere try to continue to do the things they have always done even though everything is different. Maybe it was like that during the war. Maybe people tried to do the things they had always done. But it isn't working now and maybe it didn't work then. Things aren't the same anymore and we are waiting for a miracle to change everything back to what it was like before.

Perhaps the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki longed for a miracle. Perhaps the people in Beirut today in the aftermath of the terrible explosion a few days ago long for a miracle – all instead of death, injury and illness, and ruin. Don't we all long for the miracle to cure COVID, to just make it go away? How we applaud the human testing guinea pigs, glad they are doing it for us, relieved it is not we who are exposed as they.

Things have changed, however. When things change as dramatically as they have in recent months it is not going to be the same again. It wasn't the same for Japan again. Neither was it the same for the people of the United States, or for any places subsequently which have acquired nuclear capabilities. A sickening responsibility lies alongside the careless thinking that lets people believe these weapons make them stronger than the other. If I blow up the world there is nothing left except God's tears.

Beyond the pandemic things will not be the same. We are trying to live into the new normal. The fear of COVID has created new social norms. We don't exchange handshakes, hugs or kisses with people other than immediate family anymore. We don't stand together, sit next to one another, share things like we used to share. If this pattern of behaviour continues, we will live into an evolution in social practices. There are things that will not be the same again. And so, we long for a miracle of the magnitude Peter and the other disciples in the boat witnessed when Jesus walked on water. We long for it even though we know nothing is going to be the same again afterward. And we must long for the miracle because the lesson of Peter is that we must have faith to believe in the miracle even when the odds are stacked badly against us.

Jesus has just finished the feeding of the 5000 people who had followed him, longing for his healing hand upon the sick. The feeding of the people was a sacramental miracle. They were filled with the bread of life, alongside the multiplication of fish. Jesus, however, was grieving the death of his friend John the Baptist who had been beheaded by Herod. He craved some space alone to pray and be with God. The disciples were alone in the boat. The windstorm on the lake was like a trial of faith. Could they do it with just their belief in Jesus as Lord, or wasn't this enough?

The disciples had just witnessed the miracle of bread and fish. Still the wind on the water destabilised Peter with the fear of falling into the lake and drowning. In the new normal after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Peter and the other disciples would have to learn to have faith when Jesus was not present physically to save them from the present distress. This would take another step forward in courage, like the courage of those who lived through the war, the nights under kitchen tables and in cellars and bunkers, who never knew what the next morning would bring, except the certainty of destruction and ruin.

True faith gives a believer the courage to weather the storm on their own. No matter what happens, the Lord continues to be near, to aid and assist, give strength for the journey. We need strength for the journey now in this season of disease and distance, of the closure of all the things we have taken for granted. The season will pass, the disease will resolve, and we will all be different than we were before. May God grant us all the strength and resilience for the journey, the faith to believe without seeing, to trust and hope in the Lord who never leaves us in the storms of life but sees us through to the other side.