

On VE Day

By the Rev'd James Harratt

This is a shortened and more cogent version of the talk given at the midweek service on the 6th May.

VE day is an event which in more normal times we would have expected to be a day of celebration and pageantry. I fondly remember celebrating the 50th anniversary when I was at primary school, we got to dress up in 'old fashioned' clothes (mostly by wearing a shirt) and enjoy a street party in the playground with party rings, iced gems and ice cream. That sense of coming together and celebrating reflects the popular images we see in the newsreels of people coming together in Piccadilly Circus and across towns and cities, celebrating the end of conflict in Europe, which influences how we think we should treat this day.

But looking back to 1945, it is easy to forget that for many that day wouldn't have felt like a celebration or mark an end. Many still found themselves on active service, the Royal Navy in the Pacific, over 400,000 soldiers in India and south east Asia, with many facing the prospect of being posted there there to carry on the fight, which looked to stretch out for 18 months at that point. There was for many the reality of lost homes, livelihood and loved ones, the cost and toll of which didn't end on VE day but which stretched on for decades, both in this country and across Europe.

We often want to see victory as marking a decisive point, like in some films, where good has triumphed and all shall be well again. Yet more often than not victory marks simply a midpoint in the experience of conflict and rebuilding, things are very much still not alright and the way ahead is long and difficult.

This applies also to the situation we find ourselves in at the moment. Though the language of war is tempting to use against COVID 19, we perhaps know that there isn't going to be a clear victory with the virus. Though we are post peak, the disease has not been vanquished, but looks to be a threat for a while yet, there is no clear end, all we can do is count the cost to life and livelihood with the vague hope that at some point things will get back to a semblance of how they were before.

Victory in reality is never quite what we think it going to be, they are not triumphant ends which mark a new era that we hope for, rather they are mid-way points in the story. Though the immediate struggles or threats may be over, we then have to ask ourselves what do we do now we have seen the cost of it all, the costs which will be ongoing, who do we want to be, what sort of society do we want in the light of terrible events.

It is easy to forget, but two months after those celebrations of VE day, people were asked what kind of society they wanted in the 1945 general election which saw the return of the Labour government of Clement Attlee, which brought about the welfare state, and the NHS for which we are very grateful. That vision of the welfare state has shaped us and our society deeply over the last 75 years and for all our debates about its scope and cost, we largely see it still as a cornerstone of our culture.

These same sort of questions face us amidst COVID 19. We are in a place where we have come to recognise the importance of key workers, those often low paid and precarious roles which are so important for keeping the country running. Some of us will have had time to rethink our priorities and where the balance should be. We also see anew the inequality in our country through the epidemic, in that infections rates are far higher in poorer areas with densely packed housing and where working from home isn't an option for many. As the prospect of an economic crash looms

ahead, it is likely that those same people will suffer heavily the loss of jobs and support. We face the same sort of questions as did those 75 years ago – after what we have been through how do we understand what we owe to one another, what sort of society do we want and how do we shape that.

Victories are only ever half way points in events, they are never perfect, complete events. Except one – the death and resurrection of Jesus which we celebrate in this season of Easter. An event which takes death – often synonymous with defeat and removes its sting. Yet this victory poses the same challenges for us, for though complete it is in the future, at the end when God's kingdom is fully established and also beyond the limited nature of the world in which we find ourselves at this point. How are we to live out the value of something we cannot necessarily point towards or see in its fullness?

The answer I hope, lies in a similar vein to how we approach VE day and COVID 19, to see all that has happened, to measure the cost and then ask how do we live in light of it, with thankfulness and purpose. With Easter we are called to remember all that Christ did and accomplished on the cross, and to ask ourselves how do we live and make tangible his victory here and now?