

## **Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2015 Sunday before Ascension & Seventieth Anniversary VE Day.**

**St Luke 24: 50-53** *Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

This morning The Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh are attending a service of thanksgiving in Westminster Abbey, to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945. Though it was a Tuesday, that didn't stop church bells ringing out across the length and breadth of the country the most welcome news that even though fighting still raged in the Far East, an unconditional surrender had been signed and after nearly six long years of war victory had at last been secured, in Europe. And amongst the bonfires and the beacons and the fireworks, the beckoning sound of the bells would have brought many people into church buildings where, like the disciples after the ascension of Jesus, filled with great joy they could spend their time in the temple blessing God. Indeed when Winston Churchill finally arrived at the House of Commons that afternoon after the short but crowded journey from Downing Street he moved "that this house do now attend at the church of St Margaret, Westminster, to give humble and reverent thanks to Almighty God for our deliverance from the threat of German domination".

Seventy years is a long time, but so is six years and the prospect of reunion with loved ones after all that time apart must have been a real cause for joyfulness and thankfulness. In my own experience, tours of duty in dangerous places only ever lasted six months and that was long enough and I can hardly begin to imagine what it was like for my father's generation – my own father amongst them – to set off in the late summer of 1939, without any realistic prospect of getting home properly until the springtime six years later. And not everyone of course was so fortunate as to be able to pick up again where they had left off, not everyone was so fortunate as to come back at all. What a day of mixed emotions 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 must have been for those who knew that their husband or son or father would not be coming home, but lying forever in some corner of a foreign field. Or who would return, but because of injuries sustained on the battlefield or scars inflicted in a prisoner of war camp, would never be quite the same again. In fact after what they had all come through, the soldiers and sailors and airmen of the second world war and their families waiting and working back home, life would surely not be the same again. And amidst the relief and celebration of that historic day seventy years ago there must have been a good deal of trepidation too, all round. Even the King was anxious. "Much hard work awaits us", he said in his broadcast to the nation that evening, "in the restoration of our own country after the ravages of war, and in helping to restore peace and sanity to a shattered world".

Perhaps that wasn't so very different from the disciples immediately after the ascension either. For though on the outside they were filled with joy and spent all their time in the temple giving thanks to God, how inwardly they must have wondered just what the future held now that Jesus had departed from them, and after all they had been through they too must have known in their heart of hearts that life would never be the same again. Their sojourn hadn't been six years, it had been roughly half that time since Jesus had gathered them together from their various occupations and situations and shared with them his mission and his ministry, and yet they had come through so much and not least in these most recent weeks, that it must have seemed like they had been in another world altogether. But that world was now finished and Jesus had simply withdrawn from them. How on earth would they cope with him now in heaven, without him there before them to lead and to inspire them? Like those returning to their previous occupations and situations from the European battlegrounds seventy years ago there would surely be some serious readjustments required, after all the celebrations and thanksgiving a settling down and a coming to terms with a new reality.

The prophet Isaiah shares his vision of a new reality in chapter 61, and how wonderfully appropriate it all is to the anniversary of VE Day, an anniversary of good news proclaimed to the oppressed, of liberty to captives and release to prisoners, of the prospect of cities rebuilt that had long been in ruins, of justice instead of oppression and above all a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. It was of course the very vision that Jesus had not only endorsed but adopted for his own when he had stood in the synagogue and unrolled the scroll and read out the first lines “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news...” and when he had finished he said “This passage of scripture has come true today as you heard it being read”. And the disciples knew then that it was true and they knew now that it was true and yet how they must have wished he could have stayed with them just a bit longer to help them turn the vision into reality. They didn’t yet know as St Paul one day would that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, not even trouble or hardship or persecution or hunger or poverty or danger or death. They didn’t yet know as the Romans eventually would when they received St Paul’s letter that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Those that came home on or soon after the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 must have been similarly adamant that nothing would ever be able to separate them again from their families and their friends. By contrast the disciples, coming home to Jerusalem after witnessing the ascension out at Bethany, well they must have thought their separation from Jesus was only just beginning. But when all is said and done Ascension is about homecoming too, for it marks the point at which Jesus returned to his Father’s home, there to take his rightful place by the Father’s side, never to be apart again.

There’s a paragraph towards the end of John Bunyan’s epic book *The Pilgrim’s Progress* that is as appropriate to VE day as our first reading from the Book of the prophet Isaiah. It refers to the central character Mr Valiant for Truth as he approaches the end of his earthly pilgrimage and it reads like this:

*I am going to my Father’s; and though with great difficulty I have got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the troubles I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who will now be my rewarder. When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river-side, into which as he went he said “Death where is thy sting?” And as he went down deeper he said “Grave where is thy victory?” So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.*

Carrying the marks and scars that he had shown to his disciples so soon after his resurrection, now by his Ascension Jesus returned to be with God, to bring into the very presence and experience of God in heaven all that he had suffered here on earth, and to proclaim the good news of victory not just for Europe but for all the world, not just for seventy years but for all eternity. Our familiar Easter hymn sums it up best of all:

*The strife is o’er, the battle done; Now is the Victor’s triumph won;*

*Now be the song of praise begun, Alleluia. Amen and thanks be to God.*