

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter 2020

[On Friday I chose a random hour, six o'clock, to go and pay my respects at the war memorial. I took Thomas with me to make a recording and I invite you to spend some moments of silence and reflection with me there. The prayer I conclude with was used in Westminster Abbey by the Dean at one of the many services of thanksgiving on VE Day. It is adapted from the words of Abraham Lincoln at his inauguration address in 1865.] *Play video*

On Friday the Queen spoke to the nation and said these words concerning the six year long second world war:

"At the start, the outlook seemed bleak, the end distant, the outcome uncertain, but we kept faith that the cause was right and this belief, as my father noted in his broadcast, carried us through.

"Never give up, never despair, that was the message of VE Day."

It was the vindication of Hope, a Hope that was sustained by a Prime Minister with a sense that this was his moment. Churchill had a great sense of history and destiny and a belief that what was at stake was the future of the great project of Christian civilisation. He had a vision and out of that vision he spoke words that steadied the nerves of the wartime generation. It wasn't just him of course – there was the King and there was Vera Lynn and others who wooed people into hope through their songs. Have you noticed how they are all future tense: 'we'll meet again', 'there'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover', 'there'll always be an England'? These are songs of Hope, the wings of music lifting downcast eyes to a dawn that is coming.

I've heard 'we'll meet again' at a number of funerals and I think it works, because it is a song of ultimate hope - 'we'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day'. [At John Farrant's funeral on Thursday we finished with the Abba song 'I have a dream' – that worked too:

*I have a dream, a song to sing  
To help me cope with anything  
If you see the wonder of a fairy tale  
You can take the future even if you fail  
I believe in angels  
Something good in everything I see  
I believe in angels  
When I know the time is right for me  
I'll cross the stream, I have a dream]*

Our culture may be increasingly secular and neglectful of its Christian roots, but it seems to have picked up the virus of Hope and it can't easily find a cure. The first great prophet of Hope in the biblical tradition kept a crushed nation's hopes alive during their captivity and exile in Babylon. He was every bit and more as soaring in his rhetoric as Churchill was 2,500 years later.

*'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'*

Both Martin Luther King and Winston Churchill learned some of their rhetoric from this prophet of the exile. And they were able to echo the heart of his message, the central encouragement he was able to bring, summed up in four words – 'Do not be afraid'.

They were words which St John tells us Jesus repeated in the upper room in his final words to his disciples the night of his arrest. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid'. The Christian, the person who attends above all things to the words and teaching of Jesus, need never be afraid. He didn't say 'Do not be sad', for he knew there was much to be sad about, and he didn't come to banish sadness. St Mark tells us that he was 'overwhelmed with sorrow' (Mk 14.34); St Paul wrote that he had 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish of heart' (Rom 9.2). No, we are not spared sorrow but we are encouraged never to be afraid, because in the end love will overcome hate, goodness will overcome evil and life will overcome death. That is our Easter Hope.

Later in the summer the BBC will be taking us back to relive the London Olympics, beginning with that extraordinary opening ceremony. Do you remember it – with that amazingly prescient tribute to the National Health Service? In the midst of it was the speech of the half-monster Caliban in the Tempest. Half-monster he may be but he has heard sweet music that means he too can make the prophet's affirmation:

*Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
[Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,  
The clouds me thought would open, and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked  
I cried to dream again.]*

Be not afeard. Do not be afraid. It was, as the Queen said, the message affirmed on VE Day. And it is, of course, a message for our day too.