

5th Sunday of Easter

³ Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. ⁴ Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. ⁵ And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. ⁶ Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts? ⁷ Thus says the Lord of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; ⁸ and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. (Zechariah 8:3-8)¹

The plan was that we should be celebrating the 75th anniversary of VE Day this weekend. The parish was to have a weekend of celebration starting with the Bank Holiday on Friday and ending with church services on Sunday morning. The Church of England has issued a form of service, but given the current circumstances can only be used for personal or online worship. One of the readings suggested for the service is this passage from the book of the prophet Zechariah. The prophet is speaking to the people of Israel after their return from exile in Babylon. They had been allowed back to their home country following their time in captivity, though by all accounts it wasn't a harsh captivity. Many of the Jewish people had worked their way up into responsible positions in the administration. It wasn't a bad life but their dream was to return to Jerusalem – the city of God. Jerusalem, though, was in ruins. It was going to take time for it to match the dream. They wondered whether it was even possible.

I think our experience this year might give us some sense of what they were going through. The picture of old men and women sitting in the streets of our cities – streets full of boys and girls – seems a bit like a dream to us as we get used to social distancing and self-isolation. We talk of a time when restrictions are eased but we'll still have to be careful. It'll be a while before our city streets are full and busy again and even then there will be communities grieving the loss of loved ones. We wonder whether we'll ever return to daily life as it was.

What we're experiencing now doesn't come close to what was experienced during the World Wars of the last century, though. Like the remnant of the people of Israel, those who celebrated on VE Day in 1945 were facing a time of rebuilding. It was before my time but I have memories of waste land in our cities where bomb damage was being cleared and of those in my community who had been scarred physically and mentally by their experience of war. The euphoria of VE Day was tempered by the task ahead. Restoration of Europe, like the rebuilding of Jerusalem, was a challenge.

The people of Israel were given hope by the prophet Zechariah as he reminded them of the powerful presence of God. God's hand could achieve what might seem impossible. Restoration would come when the people placed God at the centre of their rebuilding. So we remember not only the celebrations that took place on VE Day in 1945 but also the services that were held and the congregations that gathered to give thanks before God and to make a commitment to peace. Today we give thanks for the peace this country has experienced over 75 years. At the same time we place the current world crisis before God. In his hands normality will return to our lives as it did to Jerusalem after the exile and to Europe after the second World War. But it needs our commitment to trust in his infinite graciousness and care for his people. Then, with God at the centre of our lives 'old men and women will again sit in the streets...And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing. Amen

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