

HMS Leigh VE75 Address

“New family” in the midst of hardship

Family is a heavy word. Heavy because it carries so much and so many meanings that are dear to us.

On VE day 1945 the streets were packed and people sang and danced with strangers but they were family too. They had been part of a collective effort to defeat the world of an evil ideology. Naziism had indeed infected a great country and world like a virus. Our town commemorations of the liberation of Auschwitz and other camps were a moving reminder of that. Anyone who helped defeat it was family. There was joy and relief! It was over and yet not – the war in the East was yet to be won and the peace had to be a lasting one unlike the First World War. But for now Joy and relief.

For myself the sense of “the war family” was changed before my military career, in the late 90s. In my parish in West London thousands would turn out for Remembrance Sunday. The largest group were veterans of the Indian Army looking resplendent and rightly proud of their service to country, commonwealth, world and humanity. They were splendid, their dignity moving and stories humbling. In our “make and mends” altar setting for the beginning and end of this service, the Canadian flag is the only non-British representative – but let it represent the whole commonwealth and world family of allies that had become a new family in the midst of such darkness.

Our project and few days commemoration carries the world picture but focuses on our local family; our town, pier and folk of the day. Some of us joke we are from “Southend on Mud” and I remember as a small child the joy and treat going to the seafront after school in the summer term. It didn’t really matter whether the tide was in or not. If sea, you made the most of it and when not just get muddy.

It was a joy denied children for the 6 long war years - the sea front was out of bounds and given over to military operations. The resurgence of sea front life after the war was understandable. We should never take the nearest of blessings for granted - a resonance for us with ordinary pleasures denied us during our lockdown – please God our 6 weeks doesn’t turn into 6 years.

The “not knowing” being out of control, is a huge mental challenge for the human psyche. The child may cry from the back seat of the car – “are we there yet?” but we all express the same even if only to ourselves. It is hard to imagine how dark and terrifying the early years of the war were; wondering when and how it would end.

Before he enters the darkness of the Cross, Jesus says “do not worry about tomorrow for today has enough troubles of its own.” The sense of getting on with the day, the situation, of “making and mending” as best we can was a key part of the war time generation.

Some of our website stories illustrate this in shedloads. Joyce Palmer worked for HMS Westcliff as a messenger throughout the war from the age of 19. Young folk are still young, and she met her future RAF husband of 62 years on the train. The initial brush off to the wrong chat up line and the follow up is both amusing and heart-warming. Most of the war he was a prisoner and their friendship and love was tested by over three years of distance and letter writing to and from a prisoner of war camp. It is because this is not a unique story that we should be so humbled in our thanksgivings for what so many ordinary folk achieved in the face of adversity and take heart in our own challenges of today.

The river reminds us there is much we cannot control with the ebb and flow of the tide meeting the endless stream of fresh water. When we have power and control we do not always use it wisely and our current situation gives us a chance to take stock of that. In the war many noticed how quickly wild flowers took over bomb sites and birds came to feed upon them. It is sad that it sometimes takes a bomb for us to notice nature's lessons and values.

Some of our towns after the war were said to be more destroyed by the planners than the Luftwaffe. I remember visiting Hamburg, delighting in the open and natural spaces. Ironically created by the war, they were mercifully not planned away. I'm sure there are lessons here for ourselves in the aftermath of this pandemic to work with nature and people to create a better family. The groundwork of our welfare state, not least the National Health Service, was laid during the war by academics, politicians, church leaders and writers - it did not suddenly happen after the war. Fighting the battle as a family we rightly also look to the future. However, everything is pointless if we cannot delight in the present. Making a new family is about the here and now and not just wishful thinking for tomorrow. Jesus's command from the cross in the midst of his agony completing his duty for the world, beckons such a new family and beginning.

As we commemorate the Victory in Europe let us give thanks for a generation who did their duty at great cost, made the most of the day and laid foundations for new family tomorrows.

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