



The Legacy of the V1 'flying bomb', June 1944

By Andrew Gardner, Union Chapel Heritage and Outreach Worker

Readings: Ezekiel 25: 12-17; Matthew 5: 1-12

Violence is often a natural human response to violence. In the course of our thinking together today, let us ponder this. I was taught at a very young age that if someone hit me in the playground it was OK to hit them back, some would stress actually the right thing to do: to hit the bully, to strike the aggressor. This of course is how fights start and long grudges become ingrained and long term. Most of us can I expect think of someone who years later we would still like to go back in time, and just once give them a slap. Never mind that I didn't want to hit anyone and felt we'd have a happier school if nobody hit anyone; the sentiment is real. I've also heard it said light-heartedly that while girls grow into women, little boys grow up into really large little boys. We grow up with violence in comics and on screen – good always defeating evil by use of violence. Throughout history it's been the human condition. We even use it endlessly in comedy.

Look at the context, then. The new nations of 1918 continued to exact territorial revenge on the fallen empires that had held them in captivity, who in turn fought for rearrangements through the 1920s and 1930s. Appeasement was eventually tried, but it was not humanly possible to appease with any justice all the peoples of Europe. We were in a violent school writ large. With general war, those on the receiving end, occupied and terrorised, joined together. There is a problem that pacifism has in questioning at what point we have to accept a limit, say to the aggressor "No more. No more of this" when the aggressor's only response is "Make me stop". To this end, by 1944 five sixths of the world's population were in alliance against the Axis powers. We knew what was happening in Poland. Whilst incarcerated, Pastor Niemoller would write:

*"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*



Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

Poland had again been erased from the map, Czechoslovakia enslaved, France divided, the Low Countries occupied, and Stalin's compact torn up. London had been blitzed. Questioned of forming an alliance with Stalin, Churchill responded that even if Hitler's armies were to advance on the gates of hell, "I'd find it in myself to have a good word to say for Satan."

Ezekiel, in the reading we've heard today, wrote as someone exiled, homeless, deliberately separated from his community. No wonder he wanted vengeance. We may ask, was it God's vengeance or his own vengeance that he so strongly desired? Was it right in 1944 for those who bombed us because we'd bombed them – and the reverse argument holds too – to seek their own vengeance?

Ezekiel tells us of all the rage, all the damage that he wishes to see. He turns, also, to see that it doesn't need to be this way. Far from exacting vengeance ourselves, should we turn to and live by scripture we will find in God a just interlocutor. In other words, in those of Ecclesiastes, we can "Turn, turn, turn". There is a time.

We've heard also the words of Jesus' teaching in what are called the Beatitudes.

The gospels open with the words of Jesus painting a different image of God, one of love rather than vengeance. There is in any case a misreading of scripture that sees the Old Testament God one of anger and punishment, and the New Testament God one of love and forgiveness. Oh yes! There are plenty of beautiful Old Testament stories of love, kindness and understanding; and of forgiveness time and again when people turn away from God before returning to Him desperate for salvation. Paul has plenty to say about going to hell and is far more explicit about it than the Old Testament prophets.

A recent conference speaker reminded the audience that the Beatitudes are not intended to be passive, as our translation has them; rather than being passive, the Aramaic intention of the "Blessed are" prefix is to get up and do something about it.

The Beatitudes exhort us to act, they are a set of freedoms. Of the many freedoms of the New Testament is to invite all into a single belief set. Judaism has always permitted converts – Ruth in the window up there is revered as the first – but has tended to reject proselytising (and has been mistrustful of it). Orthodox Judaism continues to be bound by the 613 Old Testament commandments. Jesus came with the message that this alters now: with his coming to fulfil prophecy the entire dynamic of our relationship with God changes. In becoming a multicultural and transnational faith we are relieved of practices and customs that would be too



difficult for us, in faith, in public and in the home, of how we dress, even of what we might or might not observe on the Sabbath. The commandments are taken to a manageable level, summed up in the single requirement to love thy neighbour, summarised even with the single word, that the greatest of these is love.

Perhaps that is too simple a word. Or is it too big? One word with so many meanings to describe. The love of couples for each other and their children; the unbreakable bond between mother and son. The love between siblings. The love of peace that a beautiful day brings. The love that our sensitivities as humans give us for beauty: smelling a flower, sharing a meal, watching a sunset. Our love of freedoms. The love that should exist between nations and peoples, and the love of sharing knowledge between cultures.

In Charles Dickens, writing for an international readership with a love for a good story, we see Pip's young unrequited love in *Great Expectations*; love for a great friend, too; lifelong love between the Micawbers, and of Uriah Heep for his mother in *David Copperfield*; between grandparent and child in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; and selfless love in *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which Sidney Carton lays down his life for a stranger in another country: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

There is a dilemma here. If I am to love my neighbour, then who is my neighbour? Is it the person unknown across the channel... whose people sent that bomb?

As we are all too well aware, conflict did not end in 1945 – even in Europe we've seen Warsaw Pact invasions and the collapse of Yugoslavia. At its founding in October 1945, the United Nations had 51 member states; there are now 193. 193 countries often with internal and external problems, countries often themselves created out of conflict.

The lesson of the V1 that we mark today is that we are remember something from the past, in a way that accepts that it was our past. We have ended tit-for-tat with Germany, a terrible and deadly conflict over half a century that brought both countries to their knees. If we speak of London, Coventry, Liverpool or Belfast we can just as speak of Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin. The message today is of reconciliation.

Peacemaking is not just about taking the punches in the playground, but of seeking justice. We have Nuremberg to remind us of the evil that we are all capable of. Reconciliation was painful. It was slow. I remember my grandfather voting against EEC membership for no other reason than that it had Germans in it. He'd thought it pretty sick that we'd still had food rationing here while over there we were feeding the country we'd just pulverised. That was our humanitarian duty. We'd hit back, thumped hard, but helped them to their feet afterwards. In time they became a



thriving, strong democracy and ally. If “Blessed be the peacemakers” means “What are you going to do about it”, then rather than being self-absorbed by feelings of failure to prevent conflict, our immediate duty is to be prepared for the time that conflict ends.

We have managed here at home, to achieve greater peace in Northern Ireland than I once thought would be possible in my lifetime. Many from both sides have had to face with honesty their own violent actions. Yet we’ve seen the Queen made welcome in Dublin, and Sinn Fein at Windsor Castle. In South Africa the end of apartheid was accompanied by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In Poland, Lech Walesa found forgiving words to say on the death of General Jaruzelski.

With the passage of time memories fade, and we think of our own conflicts and injustices, not those we may feel we have inherited. Today serves to remind us of those, and to recall the futility of perpetuating them

So how do I feel now about going back in time and giving a bully a good slap. Do I still want to? Well I think I do, yes. Bad feelings run deep. But I know why I want to, and why there’s a better way.