

VE DAY - 80 YEARS ON

On Tuesday 8 May 1945, all German military operations against the allies ceased. While World War II did not end until August that year, this event marked the end of the tyranny of the Nazis. It is virtually impossible for those of us who have only known peace to comprehend how momentous this was for people who had lived in visceral fear for the previous 4 years.



For the previous couple of decades the Nazis had exploited the simmering unresolved hostilities and injustices of the First World War, the chaos unleashed by the stock market crash and Great Depression and other deep-seated social and political problems. A complex mix of angst and fear was prevalent across Europe, and the Nazis seemed to offer compelling clarity and solutions. They bolstered national pride and scapegoated people who they presented as being enemies of the state.

It's easy with hindsight for us to think to ourselves how obvious this was, how stupid and wicked people were to fall for it. But we are doing the German people a huge disservice when we do that. The reality was that in deeply chaotic times, people were desperate for certainty and a way out. When we human beings are in that kind of position, we become vulnerable to delusions. Given the wrong set of circumstances, any nation is prone to such things. In the 1930s other nations also succumbed to the same kind of toxic undercurrents, such as in Italy and Japan.

The Nazis, over a period of a decade or so, whipped up hatred both within and without Germany against many minorities including gypsies, homosexuals and most especially Jews. So the stage was set for arguably the greatest war crimes in human history, and years of senseless bloodshed.

So when we celebrate VE Day this week, I ask myself: what are we celebrating?

If we are commemorating those who fought for and died for freedom, if we are celebrating liberty, basic human rights for all, the end of tyranny, the overturning of regimes which repress democracy, create toxic nationalism and scapegoat minorities, and if we are celebrating the restoration of justice, then good.

Let's do so with both sobriety and humility - knowing that no matter how hard we try, few of us have got any idea what it was like to live in those times, and that the perfect storms that led to millions buying into delusion could happen to us.

But if we see this day as an opportunity to wave our flags, sing God Save the King and hooray for our country, while at the very same time cheering on those who scapegoat immigrants, gee-up inflated national pride and disparage minorities, then we have learned nothing. We are doing that most diabolical thing of romanticising the heroes of the past while bolstering the very same attitudes in our homes that led to them having to go to war against tyrants.

So VE Day, 80 years on, finds us at a crossroads. How will we commemorate it?

If we truly comprehend the forces of wickedness that were at work then, we will also discern them alive and well in our own time. If we truly see them for what they are, we will refuse them, we will refuse to scapegoat the easy targets of our own times: Jews, yes, Muslims too, people of differing background

and privilege to us, people fleeing tyranny and poverty, refugees, people on boats, people of differing sexuality, gender or philosophy, all will be granted respect, freedom and basic human rights. Why? Because they are human like us, and have inherent worth. Because we know that our propensity to pride and judgement makes us vulnerable to the delusions of hateful philosophies, politics, religion and cultures, and so we will cut off such undercurrents at the first sign of their diabolical appearance.

If we are truly grateful to those who suffered in the cause of freedom, then we will cherish those very freedoms and grant them to all, without exception.

If we honour lives laid down for liberty, we will be willing to be inconvenienced a little ourselves for the sake of others - whether we see eye to eye with them or not, whether we deem them 'deserving' or not (can we really make that judgement?!) because we are not, nor do we want to be, a giant cult.

As a Christian, I find Jesus' words in Nazareth, his home town, most poignant (Luke 4.16-21).

Jesus stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

His words reveal the very heart of the divine. They rattled the tribalism of his own home town folk - and after initially lauding his words, his fellow villagers turned on him and tried to throw him off a cliff. Evil can take root in any community and reacts violently when confronted with love. The antidote is to return to that very spirit of love which cherishes the poor, oppressed, imprisoned and blinded. This is a love embodied in the One who was part of a fleeing refugee family as an infant, and who retaliated to vitriol and toxic hatred with forgiveness and grace at his death. A death which was the redemption of all that is evil. A death in which is revealed resurrection - life in all its fullness for *all*.

So, let's commemorate and celebrate VE Day with sober remembrance and thanksgiving, humility, honesty, compassion and empathy, with an eye for justice, peace and a heart open to the plight of the powerless and scapegoated people of the world.

For God's sake.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kenneth", written over a diagonal line that extends from the bottom left towards the middle right of the page.

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