

Achieving Peace

When I agreed to contribute a comment on Achieving Peace for today's service I knew I had set myself a challenge. If I had the answer to achieving peace I would be ruling the world by now and it would be a very different place – as I'm sure it would be if any of us had the answer to achieving peace . On a global scale peace would mean the absence of war, both civil war and war between nations. Imagine – no more bombs, no more invasions of towns and villages, no more terrorism and extreme ideologies, no more fear, no more displaced people fleeing for their lives.

Throughout history people have fought wars but have also sought to achieve peace through a number of means; political marriages; building walls; diplomacy and treaties. The League of Nations was established in 1919 to bring stability to the world and ensure that war never broke out again. Should a dispute arise between nations a resolution would be sought through discussion and if that failed, by economic sanctions would be imposed.

Some years after the end of WW1, 'the War to end all wars,' there was a growing concern that it would be followed by an even worse war. On Armistice Day 1933 white Poppies for Peace first appeared, the symbol of the Peace Pledge Union. I am aware that the Peace Pledge Union is controversial. The white poppy can be associated with those who refuse to fight for their country; and indeed some of the movement's literature has a particular and critical view of the nature and purpose of Remembrance services. But the movement also stands for something important; the vision of a world where conflict can be resolved without violence and with justice and the commitment to achieving that vision.

In 1945 the League of Nations was succeeded by the United Nations. One of its aims was and still is 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war and to develop friendly relations among countries.' In 1981 the United Nations resolved that each year, September 21st. would be observed around the world as The International Day of Peace. All groups and nations at war would cease hostilities for a day (but I have to agree with David Stec's observation that this is unlikely to happen just because the UN says 'stop fighting.')

More achievably, people all over the world would come together to commit to peace, to talk, play and eat together, to get to know and appreciate each other, creating understanding and tolerance.

Yet, despite all these aims and visions there is still war and conflict– but perhaps less than there would be without them those aims. What can we do? We as individuals can only work on a small scale but many small scale actions add up. By coming together as just described but not only on September 21st, can we give a clear message to leaders and politicians around the world that people do not want war? Can we use our voices, our votes, our campaigns, our charity donations to bring about a fairer sharing of wealth and resources? With peace go the concepts of wellbeing, justice and equity. There is a very real fear that future wars will be sparked by scarcity of or rather unequal access to water, food and fuel.

To my mind the hardest conflicts and wars to prevent and the terrible atrocities associated with them are those arising from mind-sets moulded by extreme ideologies and the lust for power. It is easy to feel helpless and powerless in the face of such evils. But we can, of course, pray; pray for peace; pray for those who negotiate peace; pray that the mind-sets of those who initiate war, conflict and terrorism may be changed. Samuel Kobia, a past general Secretary of the World Council of Churches, wrote 'when the world is at war in so many places and the forces of violence, war and oppression seem to be increasing, praying for peace may seem to be a futile exercise. But we Christians believe both in the power of peace and the power of prayer.'

What about peace closer to home, in our own circles and families? A recent documentary on Radio 4 revealed that there is conflict and estrangement in one in five families. Several people interviewed acknowledged that arguments and resentment over wills and inheritance and a sense of being unfairly treated were at the root of the problem; others, however, admitted that it had all started from a misunderstanding or offence taken at someone's words or behaviour. Sadly, some people had concluded that the rift was beyond repair and that the only way to get their own life back on track was to sever contact with the other party. No-one wants to be on the receiving end of hurtful words and it is all too easy to speak in haste. Words can't be unsaid despite the phrase 'I take back what I said.' What can we do? Can we think before we speak? Can we avoid taking offence so badly that we clam up instead of challenging what has been said in a way which enables a constructive conversation? Not easy, but surely it is possible. But then will come perhaps the hardest challenge of all – the willingness by both sides to draw a line and move on. This year I had the pleasure and privilege once again of singing at graduation ceremonies in Lincoln. The ceremonies in the Cathedral were joyous celebrations, but later in the day the new graduates and their families were invited to attend a reflective service in the University Chapel. That service gave people attending much to think about – how the graduates had changed during their years at university; that the experience may not have been entirely positive; that the future would present challenges and difficulties as well as opportunities. But there was one line particularly in the final blessing which struck me as wise advice and a challenge:

Make peace with the past.

Judith Adam

30 September