

VJ 80 Talk – Heytesbury Church

George MacDonald Fraser, the author of the Flashman novels served in WW2 as a private soldier in the Border regiment fighting in Burma with the 14th Army. In the 1990s he published his memoirs of his time in the jungle; and the book 'Quartered Safe Out here' is a wonderful story of the realities of life as a soldier of those times – 80 years ago.

Towards the end of the book, he recalls the moment he and his comrades first heard about the dropping of a nuclear weapon on Hiroshima. He writes

'It was a fine sunny morning when the news, in its garbled form, ran around the Battalion; and it changed the world. It took a week, as all the world now knows, for the Japanese Government to call it a day, but even after the official surrender of August 15th, there was no cease fire along the Rangoon road; and it was almost a fortnight before the Japs in the field started to come in, and the business of rounding up and disarming the remnants began.

Like everyone else we were glad it was over, brought to a sudden, devastating stop by those two bombs that fell on Japan. We had not the slightest thought of what it would mean for the future, or even what it meant at the time; we did not know what the immediate effects of those bombs had been on their targets, and we didn't much care. We were of the generation to whom Coventry and the London blitz and Clydebanks and Liverpool and Plymouth were more than just names; our country had been hammered mercilessly from the sky. Part of our higher education had been devoted to techniques of killing and destruction; we were not going to lose sleep because the Japanese homeland had taken its turn. If anything at the time, remembering the kind of war it had been, we probably felt that justice had been done. But it was of small importance when weighed against the glorious fact that the war was over at last. There was certainly no moralising, no feeling at all of the guilt which some thinkers nowadays want to attach to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.'

We owe a great deal to all veterans such as George MacDonald Fraser who fought in difficult, tough jungle terrain far from home against a formidable and committed enemy; and also to those who fought in the air and at sea who also faced a resolute and at times suicidal military for whom the very notion of surrender was an anathema. And so the main purpose of our Commemoration today is as the King said on Friday 'to honour those whose service and sacrifice saw the forces of liberty prevail; whose courage and comradeship displayed in humanity's darkest hour is a flame which will blaze for eternity'

I imagine for many people living in the local villages of the Upper Wyllye Valley in August 1945 their thoughts at the war's end would have been very similar to those of George MacDonald Fraser. Relief the war – which had lasted almost 6 years – was over, and most likely a sense that Japan had got what it deserved, that the bombing was necessary in order to prevent further loss of life in the likely invasion of Japan, which was planned for 1946. On Friday, however the King also spoke about the war's final act, and reflected how the people of Japan had suffered dreadfully both then and now from the consequences of the bombing.

In July 1945, Group Captain Cheshire VC was working at a desk job in Washington DC when he was told, in the strictest secrecy, about the creation of the atomic bomb. He was also informed that he had been selected by Prime Minister Winston Churchill to witness the dropping of the bomb on a target in Japan.

In due course on the morning of 9 August, Cheshire, aboard the camera plane 'Big Stink', witnessed the explosion from 50 miles away:

He wrote of his emotions at the time; 'Against me', it seemed to declare, 'you cannot fight.' My whole being felt overwhelmed, first by a tidal wave of relief and hope – it's all over! – then by a revolt against using such a weapon.' 'I for one hold little brief for the future of civilisation', he later wrote. It was for this reason that he remained a firm believer in deterrence for the rest of his life. And in 1948, on Christmas eve he formally adopted the Roman Catholic faith and was received into the Catholic Church.

So against that backdrop of the end of war, the defeat of Japan, and the wider consequences of the first use of nuclear weapons; today is also a day of wider reflection; when we reflect on the dead of that long and bitter war, and also on the enormous loss of life across the Globe over a period of almost 6 years.. Writing in 1624, the poet John Donne wrote that: 'any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.' Donne tells us we are all connected, when one dies, we all die a little; that humanity is joined together, and this is even more prescient 80 years on in the first quarter of the 21st Century. We all should care about and reflect on the nature of human existence, and view with sadness the simple truth that war and violence continues to dominate the lives of many across the world. Something which is all too evident today in Ukraine, Israel and Gaza. I pray the day may come when war itself shall be no more. Soldiers don't wish to go to war; many who have seen the consequences of violence at first hand, remain disturbed by what they have seen for the rest of their lives. I have worked with British military veterans over many years; and

have seen at first hand the horrific effects of conflict , and the damage done to ordinary men and women. It was not only those who lost limbs or sight, there were many who were intelligent confident people, who now cannot concentrate, cannot remember things and cannot socialise. The cost of war is great indeed.

And as we stand outside this church today, we should reflect also that Jesus was a man of peace. He said that those who worked for peace were God's children. Therefore, we are most like God when we make peace. Along with most of my former and serving military colleagues, I take the view that the use of military force, and usually as a last resort, is necessary in self-defence or in order to save innocent lives. The Church has developed what is known as the Just War theory, as a way of determining when such a limited, armed response is appropriate, such as defending yourself or your nation against a violent attack, or defending the innocent, or resisting a violent and tyrannical oppressor. In Paul's epistle to Ephesians, he writes 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against power, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.' It is perhaps for historians and others to judge on the use of nuclear weapons to have ended the war against Japan; for ourselves it seems to me the responsibility that is laid on each and every one of us, is to live each day we are granted by God, the privilege and gift of life, in a way that keeps faith with those who paid the sacrifice of their lives. To remember them is not enough. We must strive to live in a manner in which we take active responsibility over everything we may positively impact. Our responsibility, our duty is to be a good person, a good neighbour and a good citizen. And on this VJ day, I ask that you reflect on the good fortune you have to live in Wiltshire and to be sat outside this beautiful old church, and to determine to make the most of the opportunities which lie before you whatever age you may be; so the sacrifice of previous generations is not wasted.