

Remembrance

This is the text of a sermon preached by Father Donald Harris, Rector of Greenford on the Sunday Evening after V.E. Day 1945 in the Open Air Theatre in Ravenor Park. Ministers from many different Christian denominations were present and some 7000 people attended.

On the 50th anniversary of V.E. Day Donald Harris returned to preach this sermon he had preached 50 years earlier.

I have, I think, two things to do this evening.

First. To express thanks to Almighty God on your behalf for saving us from great peril.

Secondly. As Rector of the Parish, to give you a message from Him.

There has been a great deal of suffering during the past five years. Not one of us has escaped it. God alone knows all the secrets of the human heart, and He alone knows what many of you still suffer - because of bereavement, anxiety over loved ones, or whatever it may be.

But what we all know very well is the way in which we have learnt during these last five years to share the strain and stress of war, share it as one great family. To think this evening is to thank.

Think for a moment of what might have happened to us in the last eleven months!

We have all heard falling elsewhere enough V -Bombs and V -Rockets to know something of the measure of our deliverance. How marvellously we have been preserved! How utterly deep and sincere and abiding then, must be our senses of gratitude. Just to think is to thank.

Not for one moment do we forget to thank God for the utter devotion to duty of our dear ones in the Forces, and they, remember, include the Home Guard.

But it is civilian life which largely predominates in Greenford. And this, surely, is a fitting occasion on which to thank God in particular for the example of cheerful self- sacrifice, courage, and wonderful good comradeship which has been shown us by the civilian war-time organisation.

But there is something else for which we are to thank God today. Something that is deeper, more wonderful, more thrilling than anything I have yet mentioned. Through the furnaces of adversity there have been signs that this Nation is recovering its soul. Do you remember those nights in the autumn and winter of 1940 when the sky glowed red over London as we shared the shelters for safety? There and then it was that we learnt. to know each other, appreciate each other, have affection for one another. Under the spell of such an experience we were drawn together. Detached from the possessions of this world, as we were compelled to be, we saw each other's souls and tasted of the true dignity of our human nature. Do you remember that morning in October 1940 when so many of you as parents, gathered round the buses to see your children off to evacuation areas? This time it was the pain of possible bereavement which drew us all together, and once more, in adversity, we realised the dignity of our souls. And then last Tuesday, the bonfires were lit, pianos brought out; we laughed, we sang, we danced. This time it was relief and joy that drew us together, and once more our souls shone forth.



So what is the supreme thing for which we have to thank God? It is simply this: He has given us in the furnace of adversity a Vision of the Truth - that we are all members of one another, a great family, His Family. We have caught a glimpse of what life in England used to be like when our ancestors shared a common faith, and what England might be like once more today. A common purpose for which we have all striven, a common peril shared, has brought about this miracle, and set this marvellous spirit of unity perpetually throbbing throughout this neighbourhood and nation.

But now where do we go from here? How can we preserve this spirit of unity, 'this coming togetherness', this spirit of true brotherhood and neighbourliness? How can we make it the corner stone of our building in the days to come - the foundation of even greater blessings to come?

What can keep alive and develop this spirit of unity which is the soul of the nation?

Can Politics? We know it can't. We all have a right to our political opinions, but opinions differ and unity is thereby destroyed.

Can Money? We know it can't. We may all aim to grow rich, but we know that love of riches breeds hatred and division among men.

There are many interests in Peace-time, as well as in War-time, which bring men and women together - but they only bring some of us together. The rest of us are left outside. We must have our clubs and pubs, our unions and associations, but none of them, just because they are by their very nature sectional and secular, can provide that marvellous spirit of unity which comes from the soul of a people - which we found when we suffered together during those years of adversity.

Then what is there? What can save us from sinking back into that ugly way of life, 'I keeps meself to meself way' of life of the 1920's and 1930's which we look back upon now with shame and regret?

One thing and one thing alone can keep fresh the Vision we have seen, and that is the Christian Religion, learnt, believed in and practised.

Yes the Christian Religion must be learnt. We are not automatically Christians because we happen to be born into a country which is called a Christian country. England needs today to learn its faith. You have your clergy and ministers to teach you. I beg of you to make full use of us. Again, England must once again become a Church-going people. The Christian Religion never has been a matter of a private affair between my soul and God.

What is it we long to preserve and develop? It is the spirit of true unity, of friendship among ourselves. This can be done only by regularly gathering together as families of God in the different Churches of our land.

God has been most merciful. We stand here now, not only to thank Him for a great deliverance from terrible evil, but we also thank Him for giving us in the furnace of adversity, a glimpse of our souls, of our true natures - that we are indeed brothers and sisters of one another - because we are all members, of His Family.

Let us go forth together then, pledged to serve His Majesty Our Lord Jesus Christ with all that devotion and courage and self sacrifice and kindness to one another that we have shown forth in the service of our Earthly King during these five dread years of war.

Only by coming together to do so, as the Family of the God and Father of us all, can we hope to keep that spirit of inspiring unity throbbing throughout this neighbourhood and nation.

Only so will Jerusalem itself in God's good time be 'built in England's green and pleasant land'.