

The 14th Sunday after Trinity

Collect: Almighty God, whose only Son has opened for us a new and living way into your presence: give us pure hearts and steadfast wills to worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Genesis 50.15–21: Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' ¹⁶ So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷ "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35: Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' ²² Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹ Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Reflection: I think that there is now only one surviving RAF airman from the Battle of Britain, which was fought over the skies of the British Isles in the summer and autumn of 1940. There are also those who lost loved ones during this and throughout the Blitz who will still recall the day when as children or young adults their lives were changed for ever. This year's national commemoration of 80 years since the Battle of Britain may be the last major commemoration when as a nation we will be able to listen to the experiences of and still help in consoling those who in many of the large towns and cities across the British Isles during the Blitz lost loved ones following air attacks. It is important that we mark this commemoration and we do it with the Covid virus threat still very evident and with the restrictions this will continue to bring on our way of living.

My late father was very pleased that he had kept a small piece of cloth torn away from a parachute following an air raid in the autumn of 1940. I am pleased that he also kept a diary of the following months in which as a 13 year old boy he describes what life was like in part of South London during the Blitz, that shows how civilian people kept going in a time of crisis. There was the ending of his school education because the local schools rarely opened and in the summer of 1941 he writes of successfully obtaining his first job. In the diary he describes the community kitchens where people could meet and eat together, of the opening up of the local Chislehurst caves as a very large air raid shelter and of receiving a Savings Book with 6d from the mayor.

There are also his descriptions of how he spent the days, riding considerable distances on his bike and usually twice a week going to the local cinema to see films that include "Old Mother Riley's Ghost" "The Thief of Baghdad" and "Turned out Nice Again".

The crisis we currently have is not one between nations and the language of war is not particularly helpful as we seek to address this crisis. Every country has been affected and there are ways in which co-operation between nations is working in a helpful way including in the research for a vaccine. The Prime Minister in 1940 was Winston Churchill. He worked closely with allies both during the conflict and in the securing and working out of the peace after the war. Much of the peace across Europe since 1945 can be attributed to him and other allied leaders and their co-operation. We need similar leaders today, especially in Western democracies who have a big vision of humanity, the sharing of common values, of the need to try to keep people together and to work tirelessly with all who seek to bring hope and purpose to communities.

I reflected last week on the vanity of small difference and the reasons why these can lead to big and unnecessary divisions. That one cause of this can be found in the human desire to want something because the other has it, be it a material possession, a particular look, or a perceived way of gaining popularity. This also is something our leaders need to be aware, especially in difficult times like the present.

The early Christians faced many challenges and one thing that made them distinctive was that their lives focused on a common way of life, their wanting what they needed rather than endlessly trying to have what they wanted and did not need. This was also the way of living that became part of the way of life for many people in the years after the Second World War, with rationing impacting on what people could have and alongside this, the start of the National Health Service and new housing and imaginative social policies that gave hope of a better life to more people.

Winston Churchill came from a privileged background but particularly from his own experiences of war and of seeing the condition of poverty in which so many lived there came also a recognition of the need to improve the conditions facing those most vulnerable and in need. He also recognised the need to be generous: "We make a living by what we earn, but we make a life by what we give."

Our world is a more complex place than in 1940, but the need for an understanding of how to bring about conflict resolution and to have a vision in helping to give hope to the vulnerable is just as important. It is something we should ask of our leaders and of the Church. Not to be like the unforgiving servant in the parable but instead to have a capacity for showing genuine pity as Joseph showed towards his brothers, and to seek forgiveness and reconciliation when mistakes are made and when people get things wrong. The cry for justice in relationships is at the heart of the Christian story and in the working out of this we find the reconciling heart of the creator, seen and lived out in the life of Jesus.