

“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” (Daniel 12:3)

May God then bless our reflections and aspirations to become wiser. Amen.

As most of you know I was born in Nuremberg where the movement of the Nazis began, and then spread across Germany. When I was a child, my mother told me how the bombs of the allies blanketed the city with a carpet of destruction, how they had to run, and hide in the air raid shelters – how scared they all were. She and her family were bombed out of their city flat. Her uncle was killed in action in the second world war. My grandfather was a Jew who got away because they had to flee, and he could hide by being unknown. My father was drafted into an air-defense unit in his late teens, and became a prisoner of war.

The traumatic experiences of these years stayed with my family and their contemporaries all through their lifetime. It affected how they lived, and how they saw the world. It was inevitable that they also passed these world views on to my generation: War was to be avoided at all costs.

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A number of years ago I went with a group to Coventry to visit the cathedral. At the time I was deeply moved, not only by the beautiful new building that had come out of the ashes, but also by the ruins that were left standing as a memorial to the losses of human lives, and the destruction the Germans wreaked in this city. What made it even more memorable was that there I first encountered the symbol of the Cross of Nails.

More recently, in Advent before the first lockdown, I visited Nuremberg. When I went to see Saint Sebald's Church, I was very surprised to meet the Cross of Nails there. The Cross of Nails community has 249 members and works towards peace and reconciliation all over the world.

But then, before that vision can become reality it is necessary to remember:

To remember those who lost their lives in the two World Wars, and others afterwards – the soldiers who died, or sustained life changing injuries, and those whose bodies were never found; the medics who were caught in the front lines – and also the civilians who lost their homes, futures and lives.

So, in Europe one day is set aside to talk about the unspeakable, and remind ourselves what humanity is capable of – for good and ill.

Remembrance Day in Germany is called People's Mourning Day. The time I remember most vividly, and uncomfortably, was from the late 1970s until the 1980s, when only the fallen soldiers were in the foreground of commemorations.

The ceremonies on the Day felt to me rather like worshipping the fallen fighters as if they were heroes, or even gods.

I still have an image of overwhelming military marches and presentations in my head. They oozed an aura of death and destruction. So, whenever I now see larger numbers of British soldiers, I get a twinge of national guilt.

I do come from the enemy nation after all.

Remembrance also evokes echoes of stories of resistance against the regime, and the terrible consequences that could have.

I often ask myself whether I would have had the wisdom and courage to resist the agenda of that totalitarian government. Could I have, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Else Hirsch, or even Willy Brandt, resisted?

44,652 people lost their lives in the Blitz. That is terrifying, but the execution of the 77,000 in Germany who resisted, worked against the regime, and were caught is just as chilling in quite a different way.

How can we then, in hindsight, judge those who complied, willingly or reluctantly? How can anyone stand up for peace, and against racial injustice while in danger of losing their own life?

Isaiah 2:4 says that God will judge between the nations and settle disputes for many peoples. So, we humans have no business doing it ourselves.

In today's Gospel Jesus explains that wars and disasters which cost many lives are the beginning of something else, something better, and maybe we are on the way.

There is a programme on the BBC iPlayer called The Violence Paradox which shows that, statistically, violence and wars are nowadays much less frequent than ever before. So, it seems that we have learned a tiny bit, even though military conflict and other atrocities have not been eradicated from the world yet. Perhaps we can build on this improvement and learn to work out disagreements with words rather than weapons. In this way only can we create a

world of love peace and unity with our fellow humans. After all, in the final battle described in revelation 19:21 the one and only weapon used by the Lamb is the word. At the very end, in death – and hopefully to some extent in the world we live in – we receive what we most desire.... Amen.