

The Devastation of War

Last Friday I returned from a week in the Germany city of Cologne, on the banks of the river Rhine. It is now a modern, bustling and cosmopolitan city. But at the end of the Second World War it lay in total ruins. It was just one vast area of complete devastation. I do not underestimate the terrible bombing of British cities but this was on a much larger scale. During the War the city endured no fewer than 262 air raids by the Western Allies. There were some 20,000 civilian casualties and the central part of the city was almost totally obliterated. Only the Cathedral still rose amid the ruins.

Walking round the city centre today it is extremely difficult to find a pre-War building. Apart from a few isolated civic buildings only the churches testify to the city's rich medieval past. And all of those had to be painstakingly restored. In most cases only the walls remained standing in 1945. Many priceless treasures were lost.

There is of course an ongoing debate as to whether such indiscriminate bombing of cities can be justified. And that is still happening today in Syria and elsewhere. The human cost cannot be counted. For it is not simply measured by the number of people who are killed or injured, or who lose their homes and livelihood. For there are also mental scars which may never heal. Certainly one of the aims of the bombing raids in the Second World War was to lower the morale of the civilian population.

This is perhaps not the place to go into the rights and wrongs of such policies and actions. In the case of Nazi Germany one could argue that it was ultimately Adolph Hitler and his accomplices who destroyed Germany rather than the allies, for the National Socialist regime was certainly an evil one that had to be resisted.

That aside the devastation caused by war and conflict is absolutely dreadful. In an ideal world it would never happen. The great ongoing task of humanity is to work to prevent that from happening. For God's will for his people is peace, harmony, working together. Indeed the whole story of salvation is one of reconciliation: God reconciling the world to himself, and by extension reconciling us his children to one another.

I chose our Bible passage from the book of Ezra (1.1-7) since it reminded me of the resolve of the people of Cologne to rebuild their city after the catastrophe of the Second World War. The context of the passage from Ezra is the return of the Hebrews to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. By the end of the War ninety-five percent of the population of Cologne had left the city. On their return for them as well as building new homes the rebuilding of their churches was a high priority. And we can appreciate the fruit of their labours today.

30th June 2017
Kingsley Boulton