

Sermon for V.J. Day 2015

'May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.' Amen

Today is the 70th Anniversary of Victory over Japan Day, when we remember and commemorate the end of the 2nd World War. 70 years ago many Maidonians were serving in the Army, Navy or the Royal Air Force out in the Far East. For them and their families 70 years ago the 15th August was a day of great relief, joy and thanksgiving. Today we remember and give thanks for those from this Parish who served and died. We also give thanks for those from this Parish and the town who served and survived.

On 15th August 1945 King George VI broadcast a speech expressing thanksgiving to God that the War was now over and the World was at peace. He said: 'Three months have passed since I asked you to join with me in an act of thanksgiving for the defeat of Germany. We then rejoiced that peace had returned to Europe, but we knew that a strong and relentless enemy still remained to be conquered in Asia. None could then tell how long or how heavy would prove the struggle that still awaited us. Japan has surrendered, so let us join in thanking Almighty God that war has ended throughout the world, and that in every country men may now turn their industry, skill, and science to repairing its frightful devastation and to building prosperity and happiness. Our sense of deliverance is overpowering, and with it all, we have a right to feel that we have done our duty. I ask you again at this solemn hour to remember all who have laid down their lives, and all who have endured the loss of those they love. Remember, too, the sufferings of those who fell into the hands of the enemy, whether as prisoners of war or because their homes had been overrun. They have been in our thoughts all through these dark years, and let us pray that one result of the defeat of Japan may be many happy reunions of those who have been long separated from each other.'

On the 70th Anniversary of V.E. Day at the Service at the Cenotaph they interviewed Robert Gail aged 93. He said that on V.E. Day 1945 'we were still fighting the Japs out in the east. They had all this celebration and we were still working hard.' He remembers all his friends who died in the War and said 'I think I'm very lucky.' On V.E. Day he was still in the Far East operating a landing craft in Southern India with the Royal Marines.

When victory in Europe was declared in May 1945, many soldiers who were still in the Far East did not know that the war in Europe was over. This is because: ¹'In 1942, following British surrenders in Singapore and Java, tens of thousands of British Army, Navy and Air Force personnel became prisoners of the Japanese. For three and a half years, they suffered exhausting labour, vicious punishment, starvation, disease and death in Japanese prison camps scattered all over the Far East.'

¹ VJ Day 2015 leaflet produced by The Royal British Legion 'From Pearl Harbour to VJ Day'

We remember especially Lance Corporal Jim Fletcher whose daughters are here today. Jim was in the Army in the Herts and Bedfordshire Regiment, based in Singapore early in 1942. In December 1941 the Japanese ²'captured Hong Kong and invaded Burma, Malaya, Borneo and the Philippines. In February 1942 they defeated British troops in Singapore.' Lance Corporal Jim Fletcher was captured with other Maidenhead soldiers and imprisoned in Changi Jail. He was starved and beaten daily. They suffered from malaria, mental torture and in a state of starvation were made to march for hours through the Jungle to keep working on the Burma railway. One prisoner of war died for every sleeper laid on that railway. They could see Red Cross parcels but were not given them by their cruel Japanese Guards. Lance Corporal Jim Fletcher was a Prisoner of War until after VJ Day. He was described by the Army as 'an honourable man'. He was airlifted back to England in 1945. Jim often woke screaming in the night and did not talk much about his terrible and horrendous experiences as a Prisoner of War. We remember and honour him today.

Most of the Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWS) were back home by the end of 1945, but many of them chose to not discuss their memories with anyone. Many suffered and ³'struggled with the memories of what happened to them during the war ever since. Vivid, recurring nightmares, phobias, depression and guilt are still all common amongst those who are alive today.' The Royal British Legion have helped many of them and some have been helped by joining clubs with other ex-prisoners. We pray for them today and we prayed *The Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOW) Prayer* earlier.

In our New Testament lesson we are encouraged to wear the 'armour' that God has given us, so that we can '**be strong in the Lord**'. We need to wear spiritual armour so we are protected and defended each day. We heard St Paul teaching about the importance of wearing 'spiritual armour'. We are urged 'to actually take' the pieces of the armour prayerfully, 'pondering their significance.' The shield protected the whole body and faith is like a shield for us. **Prayer** helps us to be '**be strong in the Lord**'. The NT lesson ended with encouragement to pray 'praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.' (v.18) **Prayers** for protection and defence are very important for us to pray for other people and ourselves. During the 2nd World War people prayed a lot for their loved ones who were in danger. People prayed at home and in Church Services. King George VI called the Nation to pray at times of great crisis. Many who served in the Forces in 2nd World War appreciated knowing that they were being prayed for in the situations of danger, when they needed to know and experience God's help and protection. We need to continue to pray for British Forces serving in places of danger, as well as praying for our family and friends. How wonderful that God hears and answers prayers!

² Usborne Introduction to the Second World War p.36

³ VJ Day 2015 leaflet produced by The Royal British Legion 'From Pearl Harbour to VJ Day'

We give thanks to God today for His protection over those serving in the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy and the Army during the Second World War. We are thankful for all those who were kept safe during times of attack and danger.

⁴In May 1940 His Majesty King George VI requested that Sunday, 26 May should be observed as a **National Day of Prayer**. In a stirring broadcast, he called the people of Britain and of the Empire to commit their cause to God. Together with members of the Cabinet, the King attended Westminster Abbey, whilst millions of his subjects in all parts of the Commonwealth and Empire flocked to the churches to join in **prayer**. The whole nation was at prayer on that Sunday. The following morning the Daily Sketch exclaimed, 'Nothing like it has ever happened before. In its hour of deep distress a heart-cry from both monarch and people alike was going up to God in prayer. And that cry did not go unanswered. For very soon miracles were seen to happen.' A furious storm broke over Flanders on Tuesday, 28 May, grounding the German Luftwaffe squadrons and enabling the British army formations, now eight to twelve miles from Dunkirk, to move up on foot to the coast in the darkness of the storm with scarcely any interruption from aircraft, which were unable to operate in such turbulent conditions. Despite the storm in Flanders, a great calm settled over the English Channel during the days which followed, and its waters became as still as a mill pond. It was this quite extraordinary calm which enabled a vast armada of little ships, big ships, warships, privately owned motor-cruisers from British rivers and estuaries – in fact, almost anything that would float – to go back and forth to rescue as many of our men as possible.' Boats from the River Thames went to rescue stranded soldiers.

We give thanks to God for the miracle of Dunkirk and all the Soldiers who returned safely in those little boats. The Daily Telegraph⁵ reported: "The prayers of the nation were answered ...the God of hosts himself had supported the valiant men of the British Expeditionary Force.' We especially remember and give thanks for the safe return of Philip Scotcher who is here today and Freddie Hatch, whose daughter Viv Williams is here remembering her Dad. We are thankful for the safe return of Harold Dovey, whose cousin Peggy Munday is a member of this Church. Peggy told me that 'all the Maidenhead boys came back from Dunkirk except Harold. The family were very worried and had to wait several days to hear' that Harold had been taken to the north of England on a Hospital Ship, because he had been injured with 'shrapnel in the back of his head.' Harold Dovey recovered and re-joined his friends in the 99th Field Regiment, who had been together since before the 2nd World War started.

⁴ Website information about National Days of Prayer

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Philip Scotcher⁶ and many local lads who were in the 99th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, in the Royal Bucks Yeomanry were out in France with the British Expeditionary Force. Before the 2nd World War began Philip and many others, including Freddie Hatch, Harold Dovey and Richard George who lived in this Parish as a boy, were Territorials. They were part-time soldiers who went to Taplow Drill Hall after work for training. They were mobilised 3 days before War broke out. They went to Newbury for further training and just before Christmas 1939 they went to France with the British Expeditionary Force. They formed a line of defence along the Belgium border with trenches and gun positions. Later the advancing German Army pushed the British Expeditionary Force back to Dunkirk where Philip waited for 1 ½ days before being rescued and brought safely back to Folkestone on a paddle steamer.

The Regiment was sent to Yorkshire and later to Tewkesbury, where in 1942 they were issued with Tropical kit and went to Glasgow. They embarked on the *Empress of Canada* for a 7 weeks journey to Bombay. The 99th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery were under the South East Asia Command and part of the 2nd Division and carried on training. The Japs came up through Burma and moved to Asam where the village of Kohima was surrounded by the Japs. Philip remembers fighting the Japs 'across a tennis court'. The battle of Kohima lasted for 3 months. One day Philip and Richard saw the hands of an unknown Scotch soldier in a shallow grave and re-buried him. Richard wrote a very moving poem *These Hands*, which was given a prize by Lord Wavell and is displayed at the back of the Church. This year at their Annual Reunion, the Kohima 71st Anniversary, they remembered that: ⁷'The 2nd Division raised the siege of Kohima in April 1944 thus halting the Japanese invasion of India. They then fought for and secured control of the Kohima – Imphal road, causing the Japanese 31st Division to withdraw from the battle. The British and Indian Army lost around 4,000 men in the course of the savage hand to hand fighting.' You will hear the famous Kohima Epitaph later in this Service: *'When you go home, tell them of us and say, "For your tomorrow, we gave our today."*

Sergeant Philip Scotcher, Lieutenant Sergeant Freddie Hatch, Private Harold Dovey and Gunner Richard George with other brave soldiers from Maidenhead went south to Imphal, fighting all the way down to Mandalay. ⁸ 'They were in continuous action through the 1944-45 monsoon.' They crossed the Irrawaddy River and were flown to Calcutta. On the news of VE day Philip says 'we were glad it's over for them', while they were waiting to go on a combined operation in South Burma. On VJ day they 'knew straight away on the radio in the Barracks north of Calcutta.' They felt relief and had celebrations. The War was over and they were 'waiting to take *their* turn to get home.'

⁶ Information told to me by Philip Scotcher

⁷ Kohima 71st Anniversary information

⁸ Notes made from Freddie Hatch's War records

The soldiers were numbered according to age. The older ones came back first.’ Philip was 24 years old and so he came later on *Winchester Castle*, arriving back in Dec 1945. There must have been great ‘welcome home’ celebrations here in Maidenhead! The War Service of our Maidenhead soldiers in the 99th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery was appreciated as they were told by the Major General Commander of the Second Division: ⁹‘Our success has been largely due to the determination and devotion to duty displayed by all ranks’. We remember and honour them today.

Albert Stroud was born at Pinkneys Green in 1921. He went to School in Maidenhead and he played cricket at Boyne Hill Cricket Club. At the outbreak of war Albert was in the Home Guard, responsible for guarding Cookham Dean, with one bullet between 5 of them. He was called up in 1941 and he joined the Royal Navy because his elder brother, Arthur, was already serving. He trained as a signalman - telegraphist and became proficient at reading signals and Morse code. His war service took him around the world. Signalman Albert Stroud went to the Mediterranean, Russia, the Middle East, the Far East, Australia and finally Shanghai, from where he was demobbed. Most of this was on convoy escort duty, with service in two perilous convoys, one being the relief of Malta on 15 August 1942 known as “Operation Pedestal”. There is information about Albert Stroud on the Display at the back of the Church including a picture he made from his drawing during the relief of Malta when he was in one of the ships alongside the large Oil Tanker bringing supplies to the starving Maltese people. He served on the Arctic Convoys, which Churchill later described as “the worst journey in the world”. Albert’s war service has been honoured with medals. He did not seek any glory or public acknowledgement; he was very aware that he was a survivor, and not a hero. I think he was a survivor and a hero. So on V.J. Day Albert Stroud was a Maidenian who was serving in the Navy in the Far East. We remember and honour him today.

The Old Testament reading today comforts us about those soldiers who died in the cause of peace. They ‘are in the hand God’. ‘Their departure was thought to be a disaster; but they are at peace.’ ‘Grace and mercy are upon’ them and they ‘will abide with Him in love’ as God ‘watches over’ them.

Today we remember by name the 14 men from this Parish who died in the Second World War. Four of them were in the Royal Navy, seven were in the Army and three in the RAF. We will hear their names, ranks, ships, regiments and squadrons in the Roll Call later. I have researched these 14 Fallen from our Parish and there is an information sheet about each one at the back of the Church, for you to look at later. Sadly Captain Walter Edward Norkett, Royal Army Service Corps, died at Dunkirk and some others died in North Africa.

⁹Commendation given to L/Sgt Hatch F.J. by C.E. Nicholson Maj Gen Commander Second Division

The Parish Magazine of Nov 1939 announced the sad news that: 'The first name to be put on the Roll of Parishioners who have given their lives in the Service of their country is that of Jack Brown, aged 19, who perished with many of his mess-mates in the sinking of HMS *Royal Oak*'. This was on 14th Oct 1939. The '*Royal Oak*' is a recognised war grave. Jack was a Boy Scout and a Choirboy when he sang in these choir-stalls.

The three who served in the RAF have known graves, so their names are not recorded at The Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede, because that lists the 20,455 who have no known grave. Sergeant William Thomas Warren from Maidenhead has his name on Panel 96 of the Runnymede Memorial, because sadly his aeroplane went down in Carmarthen Bay with no survivors in the night of 6th / 7th December 1942. Sergeant Warren's half-brother Ted, who is a RBL Member is here today remembering him. The Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede is a very moving place to visit. ¹⁰'This memorial has been built in proud memory of the Air Forces of the British Commonwealth and Empire who lost their lives serving from bases in the United Kingdom and North-West Europe in the Second World War, and who have no known graves.' This site of the Magna Carta 800 years ago is a fitting place for those 20,455 names to be recorded, as they died fighting to protect liberty and freedom of people. We read at the Runnymede Memorial that ¹¹'wherever and for as long as freedom flourishes on the earth, the men and women who possess it will thank them (these 20,455) and will say they did not die in vain.' ¹²'They died for freedom in raid and sortie over the British Isles and the lands and seas of Northern and Western Europe.'

In the All Saints Parish Magazines in June 1945, the Vicar Fr Eric Perkins recalled the excitement of V.E. Day and wrote: ¹³'The hour of victory found us proud and grateful. Proud of united effort, the courage, endurance and skill of our own people and our allies, and thankful, deeply thankful to the God who has wrought in us so great a deliverance. That was the spirit in which we gathered before the Altar at that moving V.E. day Eucharist. The great deliverance is a fact ... and we were right for a short time to give ourselves up to rejoicing at it, but it is only one of many facts with which we are confronted at this moment and we have now to turn to face others. There is the War in the Far East, very largely overshadowed by that in the West until now, but itself a major war against a terrible enemy. ... We Christians yet have the duty of doing our best to sustain one another and those outside the Church in the midst of still further blood and tears, toil and sweat, and we shall need much Grace for that.'

¹⁰ Inscription at The Air Forces Memorial, Runnymede

¹¹ Inscription at The Air Forces Memorial, Runnymede

¹² Inscription at The Air Forces Memorial, Runnymede

¹³ All Saints Boyne Hill Parish Magazine June 1945

When the 2nd World War finally ended on V.J. Day there was great rejoicing, relief and thanksgiving. In the Sept 1945 Parish Magazine we read ¹⁴'The war is happily over'.

Today we honour and give thanks for all those who served and died as well as giving thanks and honouring all those who served and survived.

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come:

Be Thou our guard while troubles last and our eternal home. Amen

Mrs Elizabeth Grace Bryson

August 2015

¹⁴ All Saints Boyne Hill Parish Magazine September 1945