

**SERMON PREACHED BY  
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CHAPLAIN ST THOMAS BECKET ANGLICAN CHURCH, HAMBURG  
SERVICE TO MARK 70<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRE-STORMING OF HAMBURG  
ST. KATHARINEN KIRCHE, 4 AUGUST 2013**

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*Als erstes möchte ich mich für mein schlechtes Deutsch entschuldigen. Französisch habe ich in der Schule gelernt, Umgangsjapanisch als ich für eine japanische Firma arbeitete, und Griechisch während meines Theologiestudiums als ich mich auf die Priesterweihe vorbereitete. Nun versuche ich, Deutsch zu lernen, aber bitte haben Sie Verständnis dafür, wenn ich heute hauptsächlich auf Englisch rede. Es ist mir eine große Ehre, bei so einem wichtigen Anlass sprechen zu dürfen. In meiner Muttersprache kann ich mich aber besser ausdrücken.*

Secondly, I am very aware that my generation did not experience the horrors of this war, but our parents did and their stories were a part of our growing up. Today we look back at events that happened in Hamburg seventy years ago. Events that changed the lives of the people of this city forever!

I have a question: Do you feel safe sitting where you are right now? Seventy years ago, in this very place, and in many other places around Hamburg, people felt anything but safe. According to some sources, the fire-storming of Hamburg, using the St Nikolai tower as a landmark, lasted for eight days and seven nights, killing over 42,000 people and wounding an additional 37,000. Over 180 large factories and 4000 small factories were destroyed as well as more than 200,000 houses. Reports tell us that the heat was so extreme that temperatures reached in excess of 800 degrees Celsius. The asphalt roads melted and caught fire and spilled oil and fuel from damaged ships and barges ignited, setting the canals and the harbour alight. I cannot even begin to imagine the sheer terror of the people as they tried to escape this inferno of death and destruction.

This attack on Hamburg was code-named 'Operation Gomorrah'. I find this a curious choice for a name because the Bible refers to Gomorrah as a town which was destroyed by God because the people were living lives contrary to God's teachings. I wonder what was in the minds of the military leaders in choosing such a code name for this mission?

Today, I do not want to dwell on the historical statistics of this terrible event. Rather, I want to ask what we have learned from it and how does this help us shape the future? Whether we see ourselves on the side of the victims, the perpetrators, or the more distantly removed observers, what can we take away from this event that shapes our present and our future? And what do we think God might be saying to us?

In Isaiah chapter 2 verse 4 we read

'God shall judge between the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.'

The prophet writes about a time when wars would cease and the world would be at peace. He uses images of transforming implements of death into implements of life and growth. Sadly, whilst peace may have come to Hamburg, and indeed between former rivals, Germany and Britain, many other parts of the world are still at war. We think of places like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, just to name a few.

From the perspective of my homeland, Australia, the war in Europe was a long way away from our shores. However, the Japanese invasion of Darwin, which virtually wiped out the city, gave a clear message to Australians that our island home was also vulnerable and could be taken from us. Thankfully this attempt was defeated and, with the help of our allies, the Japanese surrendered and Australia was safe once more. Many people still bear the scars of this event, including members of my former parish where one of our congregation members, Mavis Parkinson, was killed whilst on missionary service in Papua New Guinea. Along with her colleagues who were also killed, she is remembered as one of the New Guinea Martyrs.

Mavis was 26 and she was a teacher. She felt called to serve in a developing country, to try and help children receive a better education so, along with several other young people, she headed off into this fairly remote part of the world. When the war broke out, the Bishop advised the missionaries that if they left now, they would be safe. However, he said, if they did not leave, their safety could no longer be guaranteed. Letters written at the time by the missionaries to their families clearly show that all of them felt called to stay.

Padre Bell writes:

*The missionaries were convinced that their voluntary departure would be inconsistent with their duty, and decided to stay. One of them wrote to his father: "If I don't come out of it, just rest content that I tried to do my job faithfully."*

*A "meditation" by Padre Bell*

I am sure that in all times of war, there would be many stories of courage, bravery and faith. Many of these would go unreported and may be known to only a few or perhaps only to God, but they happen and we can be thankful for them.

After wars end, there are many scars which remain for a long time. Many people carry scars on their bodies and in their minds, many buildings are damaged and scarred and these all become reminders of atrocities of the war and the lives lived in fear. (One only has to take a trip up the St Nikolai tower and see the photos of the destruction caused to this area to see how badly scarred the landscape became).

In addition to the tragic loss of life, many of the survivors have also lost a significant part of their story. Photos, pictures, special jewelry items, toys, family treasures - these were destroyed and can never be replaced. I am in Germany without most of my personal effects such as furniture and paintings, some of which I have inherited from my family. My dining room chairs belonged to my great grandparents and have great sentimental value. These things give comfort and are part of my story. Whilst I do not have them around me at the moment, I know they are safe in a storage facility back in Australia.

For thousands of people here in Hamburg, and other parts of the world, the destruction caused by the war has destroyed a part of their story and it can never be replaced. This is another level of grief which adds to the grief of losing loved ones and homes and animals and jobs...and the list of losses goes on. The scars are deep and painful and are daily reminders of our loss.

However, we have a choice. Do we focus on the scars and remember the pain and stay bitter and angry? Or do we focus on the scars and ask ourselves, how can we work together to prevent this from happening again? How do we turn the swords into ploughshares and the spears into pruning hooks? How do we move forward and work for peace?

Many years ago, when I joined a Japanese company, my mother expressed her concerns because she had nursed many wounded soldiers who had suffered at the hands of the Japanese, as well as having many friends taken prisoner. The fact that neither I nor any of my Japanese colleagues were even alive when the war was being fought did little to take away her concerns. She said 'You never forget.' I think this is true and it may also be our biggest challenge. Because we do remember, it makes reconciliation even harder. Should Australia and Japan hate each other forever because they were enemies in 1941? Should Germany and Britain hate each other forever because they were enemies in 1943?

The answer is NO! We should not remain enemies and we should strive for ways to work together. Thankfully, over the past 70 years, this has happened and there is now a very strong partnership between some former enemies. Australia and Japan have a very healthy trading relationship and Britain and Germany are strong friends. I was told when I first arrived in Hamburg that this city is now so strongly anglophile that when it rains in London, Hamburgers put their umbrellas up in solidarity. We have come a long way since the events of 1943 – and thank God we have. The scars are still there and we do remember, but we work to overcome the differences and build on the things that unite us.

*Möge Gott uns die Gnade geben, über unsere Narben hinauszublicken, um weiter für den Frieden zu arbeiten, und unsere Kinder und Kindeskinde zu ermutigen, diese Arbeit fortzusetzen! Mögen wir hart daran arbeiten, eine Welt zu erschaffen, in der jeder Mensch sich sicher fühlen kann!*

*Amen.*

