



**From my Dutch heart I greet all of you
with the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.**

Let me first say this:

On the fifth of may 1945 – our country was liberated from the German occupation and tyranny.

I was born nine months after that date. I was born therefore as a child with connections with the war of my parents and as a child destined for a new era, an era of peace.

In my county the second World War was first and foremost not a war between two armies, but a war between the German army on one side, assisted by their Dutch friends, and ordinary Dutch citizens on the other side.

It was a war between occupiers and victims.

And the ordinary people were glad it was over when it was over.

In the first thirty or forty years after the war, one of the questions of the younger people, when we in The Netherlands annually remember the victims of that war and celebrate our liberation in may 1945 was: does this war affect my daily life and how does it affect it?

That war is over – is it not? It was the war of my parents – wasn't it?

My first memory of a remembrance ceremony was a symbolic re-enactment in my hometown of what happened during the war.

It took place in our local football ground, a place where life is always divided in “US” and “THEM”.

It was no more and no less than a played-out battle between some two hundred young men dressed as allied soldiers and about one hundred young men dressed as German soldiers.

As you might expect the allied soldiers won – again.

I was five, six years old and I enjoyed it, sitting next to my father.

It was fun, it was exciting for the young boy I was then.

Remembrance – as I now understand – in those days was the consolidation of the memory about what exactly happened.

Black was black and stayed black and white was white and stayed white.

It was therefore – as I now realise – a dangerous affair because it fed the Dutch animosity towards the Germans.

We did not step back from the past, we did not look towards the future.

And that is by no means what peace, real peace is about.

It was no more than looking back to what happened, without looking forward.

Things changed in our country – for the better.

In the first thirty or forty years nobody talked about their experiences in the war and their memories of those events.

And only after those thirty or forty years they started to talk about their painful memories – quite often only after their retirement from work.

Painful memories, because black had some shades of grey and white started to get some shades of the same colour grey as well.

Last May the Shrewsbury group came to Zutphen to join us for the Remembrance ceremony on the evening of the fourth of May and to visit places of significant meaning.

During that visit one evening we watched the Dutch movie Oorlogswinter – War in wintertime – in which it is clear that in our occupied country black was seldom just black, and white was seldom just that. Since then the Shrewsbury committee have more than a dozen copies of that movie.

**Black was seldom just black, and white was seldom just that
Maybe that is what makes remembrance so difficult in our situation.**

In the last twenty years elementary schools all over The Netherlands have adopted local monuments for victims of World War II.

In the last congregation where I served as a vicar – a small village just outside Zutphen – that monument was a grave of a young man and a young woman, who were in love and who put their lives at risk to help and hide pilots, British pilots and members of the resistance.

They died when – after a raid on their hiding place – one of the German soldiers, frustrated that they could not find them, threw his bag of hand grenades in the hole in the ground where the two lovers were hidden in a secret cupboard.

Every year – in the week before the fourth of May – one of the classes of the local elementary school goes into the forest to clean up the grave and its surroundings. Sometimes one of the comrades of the two lovers came and joined the kids on that day.

He told them what the years of war were like and the things that they did, things that were by no means just white.

In the evening of the fourth of may hundreds of people from the village start the 25 minutes walk to the monument in a silent procession and every year the average age of those who take part in the walk gets lower.

The children that cleaned up the place join the walk and those who did so last year and the years before that also join in.

This way a whole new generation walks with those who lived during the war. That – for me – is looking back and looking forward as well.

Those children take from their parents and grandparents the past on board.

In the old Hebrew language the word for remembrance – “zachar” – has to do with seed.

That is a wonderful point for reflection.

Remembrance is looking to the past and then sow memories and what we learned from them in the acre of our present life, so they can grow and bear us fruit in our future.

Remembrance is not re-enacting the past for no other reason than to keep fresh our memories of the times that we believed that black was black and white just white.

Remember the Old Testament story of Lot’s wife who preferred to look back rather than to look forward and became a salt-pillar, part of the past.

For my part the twinning between Shrewsbury and Zutphen is one of those seeds.

Seeds sown in the years after the second World War by people like Alan Townsend and others who helped the people from Zutphen recover from everything the war brought with it.

They did that by sending goods or by visiting us.

And for my part: keeping the twinning and other contacts alive today and extending them in the future is the right way to remember what happened and to work on a better world together.

We have a lot in common, a lot of common past.

We fought valiantly wars against you – especially at sea.

You came to our help when Europe suffered twice in the last century.

And my son, a sergeant in the Dutch army, found many of your young women and men, when he was sent to Afghanistan a couple of years ago for a period of five months.

**After a busy week of creating heaven and earth the good Lord concludes that it is not good for man to be alone.
And he plans to provide a partner for him.**

For my part that was the beginning - not just of the wonderful institution of marriage, but of all kind of relations and especially the great idea of twinning across frontiers.

And therefore – although it may seem very special that I was given the opportunity to preach in this service – it is within the context of the twinning and of remembrance a very normal thing.

We from Zutphen have become your partners.

I'm very honoured and grateful for this special opportunity to preach today, and I'm even more grateful that it seemed to be the most normal thing to do.

Amen.

Reverend Gerard van der Brug

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