135. An Interrupted Journey

This year is the 100th anniversary of the outbreak for World War 1. Variously referred to as the Great War or the War to End All Wars, this was not a war between uneducated, African tribes but a terrible conflict between the so-called civilised countries of Europe. It developed from relatively minor, initial provocation even when several of the major countries involved were led by cousins. Among descriptions I have read, it is stated:

*World War 1 was an extremely bloody war, with huge losses of life and little ground lost or won. Fought mostly by soldiers in trenches, World War 1 saw an estimated 10 million military deaths. While many hoped that World War 1 would be "the war to end all wars," in actuality, the concluding peace treaty set the stage for World War 2.*

World War 2 began only 21 years after the end of World War 1. Men can be slow to grasp the dreadful horror of armed conflict:

*World War 2 was the most widespread war in history, and directly involved more than 100 million people, from more than 30 different countries. Marked by mass deaths of civilians, including the Holocaust, the strategic bombing of enemy population centres, and the first use of nuclear weapons in combat, it resulted in an estimated 50 million to 85 million fatalities, the deadliest conflict in human history.*

It subsequently took 44 years, after 1945, for the so called “Cold War‘ to end and it is now almost seventy years since World War 2 ended. I like to think, nonetheless, that we have learned from the past and progressed to an understanding of the great futility that is war and the great gift that is peace. Yet there are still significant conflicts on our planet, not the least of which continues in South Sudan.

There is not much news at present in the international media about the South Sudan conflict but it has not been resolved. We hope for progress but the present situation seems to be not much more than the inevitable lull brought about by the wet season when, each year, almost seventy per cent of the roads in South Sudan become impassable. South Sudan is a very uneducated country. Few have access to television. Very few people have any knowledge of world history, including the World Wars, and of the demonstrable futility of fighting and destruction. The people of South Sudan have not learned from history to shy away from conflict. Even with the knowledge of history among the developed countries of the earth, it has been slow progress towards universal peace. It is not surprising South Sudan lags well behind on this slow and interrupted journey to lasting peace.

If there is really to be peace, it has to grow from within the human heart. St Gregory of Nyssa (who died about 385) speaks of life as a ‘journey into God, a journey into infinite goodness’. Perhaps here South Sudan does have an advantage: it is still a society where people have a strong religious ethos. Anglican Vicar, Grant Bullen described the journey this way:

‘What matters is the ‘straining forward’ (epektasis) of love and longing that permeates the whole of a human life – the journey’. What matters is that each and everyday choice to choose life in the arena of moral struggle, temptation and uncertainty. It is the journey, the living driven by the desire for goodness, the longing for God, that matters.’

Former UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjold describes the journey in similar terms:

‘The longest journey is the journey inwards of him who has chosen his destiny, who has started upon his quest for the source of his being.’
Peace negotiations are important but the internal quest for love, the desire for goodness is critical. The human journey is well summed up by T. S Eliot:

'We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.'

The tribes of South Sudan united to fight the north and gained their liberty but have now allowed their traditional rivalries to destroy the vision of a unified peaceful country. Their journey will not be complete until the leaders look again at their inner journeys and know what they really want. They need to grasp the journey into God and choose peace with God and their neighbours. Our western world has shown that this is not an easy task, and there will be interruptions along the way, but it can be done. Enemies can become allies if we make the right choices. Our exploration, our journey into God, will bring peace.

- Br Bill