

After the slaughter of the First World War, the nations that had been involved looked with horror on the scale of the devastation - a workforce depleted by millions of dead, hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans left without a family income, shell shocked or gassed survivors who would never be strong enough to work, an older generation grieving for their lost children. This was to be the war to end all wars. Nothing would, nothing should be the same ever again.

And there were glimmers of hope. From a determination that such carnage should be forever a thing of the past, the League of Nations was founded, with the objective to work for peace and disarmament.

Sadly all did not go smoothly, and indeed even today the United Nations, the organisation into which the League of Nations evolved struggles to fulfil its high ideals.

Seven years after the first war, in 1925, the Geneva Protocol was signed. This prohibited the use of biological or chemical weapons. Two years later came the first Geneva Convention. This laid down rules for how prisoners of war should be treated.

Despite these treaties, less than a generation later, most of the same countries were embroiled once more in war.

A war that saw the greatest crimes ever committed against humanity – crimes so vile that they are hard to describe, where all that was left to remind us of the lives of millions were piles of shoes and spectacles. Crimes that must never be forgotten or repeated.

A war that saw two cities completely annihilated by nuclear bombs, where all that was left of people were shadows. A scale of destruction that must never be forgotten or repeated.

But despite these great evils, hope did not die, a fragile determination to make the world a better place was still in place. As these atrocities were revealed to the world, the Geneva Convention was revised. It was made stronger to protect civilians and the wounded. There were those even more determined to work for peace.

With such treaties in place, the world would become a better place, safer, more humane.

But what's changed? We have only to look at Syria as simply one example of continuing conflict. Crimes against civilians have not stopped. 100,000 Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon. Having rules does not prevent them from being broken. And it never did.

The Hague conventions of 1899 and 1907 laid down the rules of war, but these were broken in the First World War and again in the Second World War. That they existed provided a basis for the Nuremberg trials. That they existed strengthened the will and determination to bring those responsible for war crimes to justice. The message was clear. Such evils could not be tolerated in a society with any claim to be civilised.

The rules tell the world that abuse, the mistreatment of prisoners, or the killing or rape of civilians, or the mass destruction that indiscriminately annihilates civilians, are crimes, inexcusable in any

circumstances, even when we are pushed to the limits of our endurance. These rules are the legacy of hope from conflicts past.

We have heard read to us today the passage of scripture called the Beatitudes.

Blessed are the meek.

Never confuse meekness with weakness. Meekness is not submissiveness, it is the inner strength that does not exert power over others, does not seek to dominate. That desire to dominate has caused many a conflict, and pushed many an individual into misdeeds. The meek do not desire to extend their power, they do not kill or oppress to get their way. The meek never forget that they, and every person on earth, each one of us, is a child of God, deserving of respect. That is not weakness but strength. Blessed are the meek.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. To be a peacemaker, to be someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, that's a noble task, a hard task, often a lonely task. In those situations where oppression is institutionalised, opposing it can be dangerous. But this is our task, the task given to us by Christ during the Sermon on the Mount.

Wars, tragically, have not ceased. Our armed forces are still involved in combat, far from home, in harsh terrain and incredibly difficult circumstances. Many of those whom they fight do not heed any rules of engagement, may not even know such rules exist – and, if they do, see them as rules for others, not for them. They openly flout any code of conduct for war.

How hard for our troops to keep their emotions under control in such circumstances. They need our full and unswerving support. A part of that support – perhaps the most important thing we can do – is to work for peace, to strengthen the rules of engagement, to ensure they are followed at all times and in all circumstances, to ensure that countries and individuals who break the law are brought to justice.

We do well today to remember all who have fallen in war, those who died bravely and those who died in terror. But we must do more than remember, we must honour their sacrifice when we work for justice, when we strive for peace, when we will not tolerate crimes against humanity, when we take the legacy of hope embedded in the treaties and conventions and the United Nations with the utmost seriousness. Then we will be able to say we are a civilised society.

Those who died in conflict gave their lives in the hope that this world would improve, that there might be an end to oppression, to slaughter, to persecution. May we too have the courage to work for justice and peace.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.