

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

Easter is nearly upon us, and to me it feels a lot sooner than we are ready for. It certainly falls early this year, on March 31st, when the earliest it could fall is March 22nd (when it will in 2285!) and the latest is April 25th. And this year we need to remember to put the clocks forward.

But it is not just the timing. It is the state we are in, the state the world is in, that makes us wonder whether we will be ready for Easter.

So how do we make sense of Easter, the promise of new life, in a world that seems so riven with conflict and humanitarian crises? Recently more than five hundred of us gathered in the cathedral in Bury St Edmunds for the extraordinary privilege of listening to Dame Barbara Woodward, the UK's Ambassador to the United Nations.

Dame Barbara, a native of Suffolk, willingly agreed to deliver the "Edmund Lecture," which was established to honour the political, legal and intellectual legacy of the ancient Abbey of St Edmundsbury. So Dame Barbara looked at the state of our world today through the twin lenses of the Magna Carta, the plans for which were laid by the barons in the Abbey, and the UN Charter.

She drew out the radical nature of the Magna Carta and the profound influence it has had not just on the legal and governmental understanding and practice around the world, but also as a precursor to later developments in human rights. We can trace to Magna Carta the right to be tried by our peers – trial by jury – and the beginnings of democracy where the power of the king was constrained.

And the Magna Carta, while attending inevitably to the rights of the barons, and then to other "free men," also identified a principle that others, particularly those in need such as widows, had rights.

Leaping more than 700 years to the UN Charter, Dame Barbara observed the shift from the Magna Carta still being in the name of one person, the King, to the UN Charter which begins, "We the peoples of the United Nations," so moving from an individual to a body of peoples. That initial body comprised 50 nations and now the total stands at 193. The first two of the four clauses of the Charter declare the signatories are determined "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small."

While we can see the extraordinary work that the UN and its agencies have accomplished, we can also see where it has failed, and the current conflicts, not least in Ukraine and in Gaza and the suffering being inflicted there and elsewhere around the world, show the limits to what the UN seems able to achieve.

Dame Barbara both affirmed the value of what the UN is able to do and spoke of the need for reform so that it could become more effective to face the mounting global challenges which include the climate crisis, which itself will provoke increasing conflict. And she drew hope from witnessing people across the world, in small and great ways, committing to acts of kindness, compassion, truth and justice. It is the continuing process of uniting people around these aims that will ensure the UN is able to exercise its vital purpose.

That hope is possible if we all play a part in this, our small – or great – actions of kindness, compassion, truth and justice which help to build a world that is safer for everyone.

Which brings me back to Easter. Jesus rising from the dead, after his brutal execution, is the world's supreme act of the triumph of life over death, of hope over devastation. Christians believe that is the reality we live in – that life overcomes death, hope overcomes devastation, that God has made it so and continues to make it so.

We also believe that, with God's help, we have a part to play, through our own individual actions reflecting our belief that life and hope are what endures. And we believe that our working together for good is a reflection of the reconciliation of all people and all peoples that God wills and has made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That does not mean there is no suffering, nor no evil. We know that all too well. But it does mean that all our actions of kindness, compassion, truth and justice have value. And our acts of good join the flow of all such actions pointing to a God-given destiny. A fulfilment that we might call peace, Shalom, or heaven.