



We are not at war - *By Reverend Carla Maurer*

"I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too will end, that peace and tranquillity will return once more."

These are the words of a young teenage girl, who spent two years of her short life in a confined flat with her parents and her sister. A walk in the streets or even just opening the window could have cost them their lives, and so they hardly ever set foot outside the concealed rooms behind a bookcase in a townhouse in Amsterdam.

Anne Frank is one of the most discussed Jewish victims of the Holocaust, and she gained fame posthumously with the book "The Diary of a Young Girl" published by her father Otto in 1947. He was the sole survivor of the Frank family. Anne and her sister Margot died at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in February or March 1945 following the discovery of their hiding and their deportation. If they had survived another two months in the camps, the two girls would still be alive...

In May 1945, a mild and sunny spring like this year, the Second World War came to an end, a war that the eldest members of our congregation still remember from their own experience. To this day, the trauma and the psychological consequences of this inhuman war can be felt in Europe and across the world. Those born during or in the years after the war, witnessed the reconstruction of a ruined continent during their

childhood and youth. Their children and grandchildren now have the chance to address and unlock the collective trauma - a huge task!

To talk about war in the context of the coronavirus pandemic is exaggerated. We are not at war. The references to 'war cabinets' and 'front lines' demonstrates belligerence more than anything else, and the suggestion that those worst inflicted by the disease can fight it off by sheer will power and strength regardless of medical, social and economic circumstances is "glib to the point of insult", as Guardian columnist Marina Hyde recently wrote, quoting the late Deborah Orr who died from cancer and had written her rules how to talk to cancer patients. In a war, humanity turns against itself, killing each other for ideological reasons without consideration for the value of individual life. In a public health crisis, as we are experiencing it at present, the opposite happens: humanity pulls together in one big effort to save lives. We really have to think about better analogies than war, if any are needed at all. Perhaps the only parallel between war and pandemic is "that they both involve strengthening state power and spending, and both require collective action." (David Edgerton in the *New Statesman*, 3 April 2020).

The war analogy used by many state leaders suggests that there is a cruel enemy that we have to fight off. There are good reasons to feel like that. Some aspects of nature are fatal for the human race. But if we look at the reasons and at the far-

reaching devastating consequences of war that affect generations, the comparison doesn't seem appropriate. The identification of the virus as an 'enemy' illustrates that we see ourselves as separate from nature, whereas in fact we are a part of nature, or to quote priest and zen teacher Alan Watts: "You didn't come into this world. You came out of it, like a wave from the ocean. You are no stranger here." And the Bible says: "All come from dust, and to dust all return." (Ecclesiastes 3:20) When we are personally affected by loss and illness, it can be challenging to reconcile the fact that we come from nature with the experience of its destructiveness.

This public health crisis brings the best and the worst out of people. We see raided supermarket shelves as well as neighbourhood help, self-restriction to save the lives of people we have never met as well as racial scapegoating. The virus doesn't differentiate between rich and poor, but our social circumstances and ethnic background can affect the exposure to the risk and access to treatment which illustrates the high levels of injustice in our societies. I hope that the lessons learnt from the coronavirus pandemic will highlight the need for fundamental change and increase our ability to follow the path of justice, humility, forgiveness, empathy and peace – not just in the immediate aftermath of this health crisis, but for a long time to come.