In February 1942, the worst battle in human history eventually came to an end. Over 200 days, almost two million people had died – one and a half million soldiers and around half a million civilians. It was the battle of Stalingrad, and last week I was with the Lord Mayor of Coventry and 180 other international representatives to share with the people of Stalingrad – now called Volgograd – and the country of Russia in commemorating what they hail as a glorious victory. In Russia, they don’t really do repentance and reconciliation on the national stage, so although there is a Reconciliation monument in the city, with a cross unveiled by German and Russian representatives, it didn’t feature on our tour, and the mood was all about the glorious defeat of the Nazis – which is understandable, given the circumstances of the battle.

Hitler had ordered his troops into Russia, and they had advanced rapidly Eastwards across a fairly level landscape until they reached far into the country, almost as far as the great Volga river. They expected to sweep on across the river and turn left, in effect, up towards Moscow. However, the people of the city, and the amassing Russian armies, put up a determined resistance – and Stalin ordered that no one, not even women and children, be allowed to leave the city - and the siege of Stalingrad began. In the early stages, it was the Russians who were pinned against the sweeping river by the Germans – but by Christmas the tide had turned and it was the German troops who were surrounded by Russians. The conditions were atrocious, with starvation and sickness the order of the day on both sides. In the midst of this horror, a pastor-doctor in the German dugouts drew an extraordinarily beautiful image of a Madonna and Child in the Russian style, which became known as the Stalingrad Madonna. The artist, Kurt Reuber, survived the siege but not the prison camp, but the image, drawn on the back of a Russian Military map, and is now in our sister church in Berlin. A faithful copy is in our Millennium Chapel, presented by the Lutheran Bishop of Berlin and the Orthodox Archbishop from Volgograd.

On February 2nd 1942 the German General, Paulus, finally surrendered. In 1944, the women of Coventry sent a message of solidarity to the surviving women of Stalingrad, embroidered on a tablecloth – over 800 names were sewn into the fabric. With that act, the first twin cities were established, and so already out of great horror, something good was begun to be born. The twin cities movement, which started there between our city and a ruined city in the wastelands of Russia, now links peoples across the whole world. But what else can we find of hope in this ghastly story?

Because my visit was part of a civic delegation, one of the most disconcerting things was the almost total absence of any religious context. Stalingrad, or Volgograd, is twinned with 40 different cities, of which 28 were represented. There were endless speeches, and toasts (lots of vodka) and gifts from city to city, including one of our own reconciliation statues. We viewed a huge military parade, in which I found myself bizarrely in the midst of a row of generals from Kazakhstan – I’m sure my chilly face (it was around -13 degrees) is all over Kazak media. We went to an extraordinary military concert in a huge hall where every single person’s name was in a leger and had to be checked on entry – because as the event started, Vladimir Putin came on stage and addressed us. We went to visit the Mother Russia statue on the Mamayev Hill, a key site of fighting in the battle – the statue is almost 300 feet high, twice the height of the Statue of Liberty – it was quite unbelievably cold. But nowhere was there anything other than celebration of victory.

I knew that there was a Cross of Nails in the City, somewhere – I had heard from Paul Oestreicher, former Canon of Reconciliation here in Coventry, that he had seen one on his visit, around 1990. But no-one could point to where it was, and there seemed no real engagement with the Church. I did spot a couple of bishops at the military parade, and tried to have a conversation through an interpreter – it was pleasant enough, and we exchanged Biblical texts about peace, but it was not substantial. I had an interesting conversation with our interpreter, a young woman called Maria, or Masha: she proclaimed herself non religious – which is why she didn’t know where to start in the quest for the Cross of Nails. I asked her what she thought about all the parades and the speeches and, essentially about war:
she really had no hope. Last year, building a new water main outside her house, they had uncovered a common grave with 300 bodies. The city is built on death, and there seemed little means of really addressing that, of what we would call Healing the Wounds of History.

Eventually we did find the cross. It had been moved from its original location in the Kazak Cathedral to the Museum of the Battle. It was probably sent to Stalingrad before it was renamed in 1961 as part of an exchange of gifts which began with a beautifully designed greeting from the Lord Mayor of Coventry in 1958, which was reciprocated with the gift of an Icon to our City – which is now in our gallery downstairs, which we think led to the sending of the Cross of Nails. It was remarkably moving to find. However, even more moving, and in the end the heart of the visit for me, was an invitation to accompany the German Ambassador to Russia, along with the Austrian ambassador and their delegations, to the huge German War Graves memorial far outside the city. A Russian war grave and a German war grave sit alongside each other in what was a snowy, wintry waste. They have interred the bodies of 62,000 German soldiers there, and there is a memorial to a further 120,000 who were never found. Between the two cemeteries is a simple Chapel of Reconciliation, open to the sky, and with two crosses, one in the Western and one in the Russian style. I was asked to lead prayers, and to stand in that bleak wasteland, which has seen such unimaginable horror, and read first the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation, and then to lead the Lord’s Prayer in the German Language, was an immense privilege. We were also accompanied by representatives from the British Embassy in Moscow – who we had met in our brief visit there before travelling on down to Volgograd – and they believe that the presence of senior Anglican church representatives is the most significant thing in British – Russian relations for the last three years. In Moscow, I had stood by the cross of Nails in the Anglican chaplaincy, which Archbishop Justin visited only last November.

The Christian faith has something quite unique, embodied here in our buildings in this Cathedral. We are able to stand in the midst of horror, of destruction, of fractured and broken dreams, and know that God has not abandoned us. We have a precious commodity to share: the gift of Hope. This week I have again been interpreting our buildings and our story to artists who are hoping to deliver some major cultural events here to mark our Centenary – and explaining yet again that here we are able to be honest about the brokenness of the world, but in the context of hope, the context that God has not abandoned us. Today’s Feast of the Transfiguration is, amongst other things, about perspective – the perspective of the high mountain where Peter and James and John were given the privilege of seeing Jesus for who he really is, the glorious Son of God. We live our lives in the foothills, and we lose perspective so quickly – caught, as someone once said, in the ‘ambush of personal history’. Sometimes we have to dig deep to discover the presence of God – or climb up high – to discover the light of God shining in our darkness, sometimes with just enough light to take a single step forward. Having seen that light, we discover the strength to carry on – just as Jesus and the disciples went on from the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus was revealed in glory towards Jerusalem where his glory would be revealed in quite a different way. We begin that journey with him on Wednesday, with the beginning of Lent. The Mount of Transfiguration is so different to the Mamayov Hill: on the latter, hope is found through violent and dogged defiance – heroism, to be sure, but no secure hope for the peace of the world. On the former, hope is found through the light of God breaking through and revealing his presence, to accompany Christ and his disciples through the coming journey to Jerusalem.

I cannot imagine living without the light of the hope of Christ. I cannot imagine what I would do, where I would go, to find hope in the midst of the history of a place like Stalingrad, without the presence of Jesus Christ. The contrast which the Christian faith brings was also brought starkly home to us a few days earlier, in Moscow. We didn’t have long in Moscow, and we were due to have lunch in the British Embassy – where we were to leave a Reconciliation Statue. So we arranged to meet at nine a.m. to walk over the bridge from our hotel to Red Square and St. Basil’s Cathedral. Arriving there in freezing snow, we discovered that almost nothing opened until ten, and the Cathedral not until eleven. For want of anything else to do, we went into Lenin’s tomb. He remains there, as he has since his death in 1924, waxen and preserved. It is a place of darkness and of death. It was impossible not to reflect on the contrast with the site of the tomb of Christ, which I’ve also visited: there, the message is clear – he is not here. He is risen. Light has streamed into, and out from the tomb, and there is hope.

It would not be for me to criticize another nation’s philosophy. And today, of course, there is a radical resurgence in faith, through the Russian Orthodox church, who are busy rebuilding across Russia. The great gift of the orthodox tradition, through their theology and their worship is mystery. A huge treat whilst I was there was to stand face to face with the great icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev, calling us into us into community, even conversation with Godself. I had to stumble through streets full of deep snow and stranded vehicles to reach it, in the few minutes I had to spare before our transport left Moscow for the flight down to Volgograd. Perhaps in the end it is mystery,
whether rich darkness or light so dazzling that you cannot see, the effect is the same, which is hope for a country so
great as theirs: the story is simply too great to grasp, and we somehow need to be grasped by also the presence of
God beyond our understanding.

On Wednesday we will begin our shared journey through Lent. Like other journeys we make, whether external or,
perhaps more significantly, internal, it will be a journey of discovery. To be truly valuable, it will be a journey of
honesty, to take us to the heights and depths of ourselves and discover God there. The truth of my time in Russia
was that the most profound journey I made was the internal one when we learned that we were not going to be able
to travel home when we expected, and there were going to be more tired days in a tiny room looking out over a grey
and snowy city ... that was when I discovered something of that conversation taking place in the Rublev icon still
continuing, and reassuring me of God’s presence, his purpose, his hope.

There is a song by the Smiths, written in 1986, which has the refrain ‘there is a light that never goes out’. Russia, and
Volgograd in particular, is a place where that truth needs to be known, and held, Like Coventry, it is a place that can
share that truth with the rest of the world – because they have discovered it for themselves. But we hold it alongside
brokenness, and are not afraid to do so. That gives it truly redemptive power, because it is based in the truth of
Jesus Christ – our truth, which holds us wherever we are, and lights the way home.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or
imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.