**SECOND PLACE WINNER**

**Building Peaceful Futures**

**By Thea Smith, Loreto School, Altrincham**

I stand amongst the ruins of a broken world.

I look between the North and the South - I see violent divisions. Racism, exploitation, raging inequality. Where some live with silk clothes and others die from thirst. Some have the world at their fingertips; others are on their knees.

I look to the East - I see political turmoil, controlled media, a war that threatens to tear everything apart. The discussion of nuclear weapons sits at the forefront, in between stories reporting numbers of the dead, and hope crushed underfoot as millions of refugees flee their homes.

I look to the West - I see how it has used the rest of the world- the people and the environment- for its own benefit. I watch as it blames other countries for not being able to afford greener ways to develop, hypocrisy which is surely too apparent to be ignored.

I look to the past - I see countless battles fought by countless leaders, countless soldiers marching countless steps, often for no gain. Years lost to despair and futility, memories scarred with the horrors of international, global, conflict. People persecuted and imprisoned, their names and voices marked in history's eyes as irrelevant.

I look to the future - I see nothing but the darkness of settled pollution, of ideas trialled and failed, of our planet crumbling, temperatures rising, biodiversity gone. People fighting against nature to bring a level of comfort that can no longer be achieved, and could never be sustained in the first place, because of our selfishness.

In every direction, all throughout time, humanity has been a victim of itself. Never able to accept being wrong, never wanting to give up material prizes, always searching to ensure longevity. And it's gone about that in a way that instead ensured destruction. Destruction of peace, of unity, of other species that would have surely fared better without it.

So, it can seem hopeless. When you look at the news and are confronted with perpetual negativity, it can seem there's no way, no time, for us to recover. But what if there is? Can we look past the problems and see a world of peace, where everyone is safe?

I think we can. Because amidst all the suffering, and uncertainty, and disruption, I see people who have faith. Faith in their God, faith in themselves, faith in there being enough people who see that it's not too late. On every scale, we are responsible for driving the changes that lead to the end of conflict, and as I look around the Earth I see, more and more, how people are standing up for what is right.

I look between the North and the South - I see people bringing aid and awareness, spreading messages of love, because someone cares. And if one person cares, that one person can start a chain of events that only brings positivity.

I look to the East - I see many places that are progressing rapidly, developing their economies, and raising standards of living. This leads to more countries being on an equal footing, which opens doors to trade, and mutually beneficial agreements, with which comes increased political stability and less exploitation.

I look to the West - I see people taking responsibility for the past and paving the way to a better future, adding compensation for countries impacted by things out of their control, supporting clean industrialisation. There is a growing movement amongst the very rich who are recognising that even a small increase in their taxation could bring literal billions out of poverty. And they are finally asking for that to happen.

I look to the past - I see the people who made a difference. Some have their name engraved in gold, some are a footnote on a memorial. But they all had an impact. Humans tend to preserve the 'bad', which in turn makes us forget the 'good'. We study the dictators and the damage, the threats and the terrors. But interwoven in the threads that is the vast tapestry of history, there's a constant path of positivity, one which maybe isn't studied as much as it should be.

I look to the future - I see a world of equality, of safety, of comfort. Where people can live without fear of lethal opposition, and don't have to worry about the bare essentials that are human rights. Where everyone gets a chance and can make their own decisions, unburdened by things that we, as a species and society, need to work hard to eliminate.

Peace must start somewhere though, and where better than yourself? Not everyone is going to be a globally powerful individual. But individuals make up the power that is required for a harmonious future. Which means if we strive for a world we know can be peaceful, every little thing we do is going to build the foundations for what we need to achieve it.

I stand amongst the beginnings of the future, and that future belongs to peace.