

Sermon for Holocaust Memorial Day

27 January 2019

In recent decades, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust has encouraged remembrance of the terrible murder of six million Jews under the Nazi persecution and the date of January 27 marks the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. It is therefore especially right that on this Sunday, this year, we remember not only the persecution and killing of Jewish populations across central Europe during the Second World War but indeed the centuries of such killings and also the genocidal wars which have taken place since 1945.

To mark this day there will be a film and discussion this afternoon in the Showroom, when through the film, *My Nazi Legacy*, the elderly sons of two Nazi war criminals tell of how they have dealt with the actions of their fathers. And tomorrow in the Winter Garden, there will be a candlelit vigil from 5.30pm to 7pm.

I am currently reading Ian Kershaw's history of Europe from 1914 to 1945, appropriately entitled 'To Hell and Back.' The recalling of history reminds us of the persecution of Jewish people throughout the so-called Christian Era. At times of economic depression and political chaos, for example in the early 1920s after the first world war, in countries such as Russia, there was a cascade of anti-Jewish violence. In Ukraine alone somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000 Jews were killed in some 1300 pogroms in 1921. But the causes of antisemitism, as we know, have deep theological roots from the early centuries when the Christian church of the Constantinian empire saw the Jews and not the Romans as the Christ killers.

It is only right therefore, as we come together to read the scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian testaments, that we remember the scholarship of the last two hundred years and what it really does teach us about the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and our gospel today is a very suitable platform for our reflection.

So let's begin by dealing with a few Aunt Sallies. Most of us will remember the Jesus of our Sunday school days, white, handsome, meek and mild. Or the Jesus of the early movies, looking so American. Time and again we have created Jesus in our own image, as indeed we do with God. I once read of a Texas senator who opposed the introduction of foreign languages in the schools of Texas, saying 'If English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us'. Ideas of Jesus abound – was he gay? Was he married? Did he even exist?

During our advent discussion group, as we examined in detail the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, we recalled how the stories around the birth of Jesus, so deeply theological can have the danger of taking us away from the factual reality of who Jesus was as a human being.

So let's recall what a consensus of scholarship would first of all tell us about Jesus. He was born into an observant Jewish family, sharing his Nazareth life with four brothers and sisters. He lived and died a faithful Jew, observing dietary laws and the major festivals, versed in the Hebrew scriptures and a religious enthusiast, baptized by that fiery preacher John. The story of how this charismatic Jewish teacher became the Christ of faith is here in the unfolding gospels, the acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul. And whilst two thousand years of Christian history has sought to separate the two great religions of Judaism and Christianity, as we mark Holocaust Memorial Day there is a fresh opportunity to see how the authentic voice of Jesus can and does bring hope to all in our world today.

Here in the fourth chapter of Luke we have Jesus in a fully Jewish setting, in the synagogue at Nazareth, on home territory. Baptised with others by John, anticipating some kind of cataclysmic intervention by God to free the Jewish homelands from the oppression of pagan Rome, here Jesus is fired up, learned in the words of the prophets of Israel, in this case Isaiah chapter 58.

The Lord has appointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed.

Those words have inspired politicians, revolutionaries, freedom fighters, religious leaders across the world in all cultures and throughout history. Good news for the poor – freedom for the oppressed. Whether you are living on a sink estate in Sheffield, dependant on benefits and relying on foodbanks, whether you are living in the squalor of a Venezuelan favela, fearful at the moment for your country's future, whether you are on the high seas in a flimsy boat escaping from war torn Syria, whether you are being held as a political prisoner in Iran, these words of Jesus, these words of Isaiah echo down the ages, stirring people to action, calling for a transformation of our world.

To make sense of the world, peoples from the beginnings of civilisation have turned to religion. Having a belief in a beneficent Being who brings order and beauty to our world is there in most religions. Our Psalm for today, in its opening verses declares the glory of God seen in God's handiwork and human beings are that work. As Irenaeus said, The glory of God is seen in a person fully alive. Jesus is quoted in John's gospel as saying 'I have come that you may have life in all its fullness'. The Jewish scriptures and the Christian testament both affirm the Dream of God for God's world, a world of peace and harmony, of justice and righteousness. Yet then and now we are far from that Eden, that paradise. In Jesus's day, religion had not helped when it became distorted. Hence in many ways, through parables and actions, Jesus sought to show the love of God which transcended human barriers, a love which was not reserved for one tribe, for one religion, for one race. Jesus longed for a return to the ethical teachings of the Torah, to offer a more simple and more challenging Judaism – to love God and to love neighbour as oneself. Later St Paul, here in 1 Corinthians was to declare that in the One Spirit we are all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.

Loving God and neighbour, the backbone of our religious faith, uniting Jew, Muslim and Christian. And we know that this backbone is needed today as much as ever. Like the 1920s the world is facing turbulence, both economic and social. Like the 1920's scapegoats are looked for. Demagogues arrive, be they in the form of President Trump, neo Nazis, populist politicians, fundamentalist preachers. There is a tribal loyalty to nation above a sense of international fraternity. Immigrants are blamed for the ills of society rather than looking to the real causes of poverty and injustice. The financial elite meet at Davos, fearful for their security. And this in a world in which the world's 26 richest billionaires now hold as much wealth as the bottom half of the world's population, some 3.8 billion people.

We are no longer living in a world where we expect a cataclysmic intervention by God, some kind of Armageddon, some kind of imminent return of Jesus to judge the quick and the dead. That is really the stuff of street evangelists. But Christians and Jews together affirm the belief that this is God's world, that we are all made in the image of God, and God is love. And whether with Julian of Norwich we believe that all will be well in the fulness of time, in the meantime we need to remember past deeds, to name the evil which human beings are capable of and to continue to, as the body of Christ, to follow the Prayer of St Francis, where there is hatred let us sow love, where there is despair, hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. And more than utter this prayer (after all Margaret Thatcher did the same outside number 10) surely we need to act upon it as citizens living in a democracy. We need, it seems to me, to demand a society which is more equal, more respectful of each other, prepared to see the image of Christ in one another. And yes that does involve us all in making choices, choosing our politicians, choosing how we spend our money, choosing to follow Jesus, the man for Others.

Rev'd Adrian Alker