

Sermon for Evensong on the 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, 27th January 2019

Psalm 33; Numbers 9:17-24; 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 - Holocaust Memorial Day 2019

When I went to the Holy Land a few years ago, on the Clandon parish pilgrimage led by Revd Barry Preece, we had an optional visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum. It came as a complete change of mood from the rest of the trip. Every day we had visited sites from the Bible, in Bethlehem or in Galilee or in Jerusalem, following in the footsteps of Jesus, and every day we worshipped together in these fabled places, which before we had only imagined, perhaps helped by some pictures in books or in museums which we had been to, but now where we actually were in the places where Jesus had been.

Now we really were in the Garden of Gethsemane, or out in the Sea of Galilee, imagining St Peter and the disciples not catching any fish. Generally, it was a happy, upbeat time. We met for supper and told each other stories over nice suppers and drinkable wines. Some of the Lebanese wines were really memorable ... We didn't actually go to a party at Cana in Galilee, but we got the flavour of it.

At the same time, we could see that there was a difference between the Israeli and Palestinian districts. We could see the awfully ugly and massive wall, dividing the two. We came across the 'settlements', which we had read about, where Israeli 'settlers' had established themselves, in contravention of United Nations resolutions. But despite the rather temporary-sounding name, 'settlements', they weren't some sort of temporary camp; think instead of something like Milton Keynes. Milton Keynes on the top of a hill, in one instance [Wadi Fuqeen], pouring its sewage down into the valley below, where the Palestinians, whose land had been taken, still eked out a meagre existence.

There was a 'night tour' by coach around Israeli Jerusalem. No more dusty Middle Eastern roads, teeming with scruffy lorries and minivans, that you get in the Palestinian part of Jerusalem. No, here it was broad highways, sprinklers, green grass verges. Almost nobody walking, but rather most people driving. A beautiful hotel, the 'American Colony' - that is really its name. We didn't go in, but I could tell that it would be nice to stay there.

On the way down to Masada in the desert, to see Herod's amazing mountain-top palace, we went through a check-point between Israel and Palestine. It took our 40-seater coach a couple of minutes to be waved through. The queue of weary-looking Palestinians waiting to cross the border - some of them to their own land, which had been arbitrarily divided by the Israeli wall - were, we were told, often delayed for more than an hour, for no reason.

And then some of us went to the Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem. I remember remarkably mundane exhibits; freight trains whose cargo was people; endless paperwork, detailing everything about that 'cargo'; personal effects, the stuff ordinary people had with them. But truly I felt a kind of internal contradiction. The exhibits were fine, so far as they went. But the point was, that the banality of this industrialised slaughter was overwhelming. Very few of the things we saw in the museum were, in themselves, weapons or instruments of torture. But nevertheless, this was killing on an unforeseeable and awful scale. It was too much to take in properly, but it looked mundane and normal. Nothing could justify the awfulness of the Nazi persecution in the Second World War, nothing could justify that genocide.

I've just finished reading a really good and enlightening book by Philippe Sands, the well-known QC who specialises in the defence of human rights, called 'East West Street'. That street is in the city

called Lvov, or Lviv, or Lemberg - a city now in Ukraine, which has been in Austria and Poland also at various times, where two of the greatest academic lawyers of the modern era were born: Sir Hersch Lauterpacht, who invented the legal concept of crimes against humanity, and Professor Raphael Lemkin, who invented the word - and the concept - of 'genocide'. Both were Jewish. Both lost many of their families in the Holocaust. Philippe Sands' grandfather also came from there.

'Genocide' was defined by Prof. Lemkin as acts 'directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of national groups'. [See

<http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/AxisRule1944-1.htm>]

The Nazis killed people not because of who they were or what they had done, but because of what they were. To be a Jew was to attract a death sentence. The term 'genocide' was first used, at Prof. Lemkin's suggestion, in the charges brought in the great Nuremberg trial of the Nazi leaders in 1944. Prof. Lemkin had coined the word from the Greek root $\gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\varsigma$, a tribe, and the Latin *cido*, I kill.

When I went round the Yad Vashem museum, I felt strangely detached. On the one hand, I felt the mundane, industrial horror of the concentration camps. Holocaust Memorial Day is on January 27th because that is the day when Auschwitz was liberated. On the other hand, the fact that surely no-one, now, would seriously think of doing anything as awful as the Nazis did.

Except that they have done. There have been other instances of genocide since WW2. The massacres in Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia, for instance. What causes it?

No clues in the lesson from the Book of Numbers. Rather recondite stuff about when the Israelites, in exile but having come

out of captivity in Egypt, would move forward when the ‘tabernacle’, the tent covering the Ark of the Covenant, the very ornamental box containing the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets, was covered and uncovered by clouds. This is part of the Torah, the law, the story, of Moses, and of the people of Israel, God’s chosen people: fine; but why would anyone hate those people?

And in the other lesson from St Paul, the emphasis is on the inclusiveness of Christianity. Come as you are. You don’t have to attain any status first. You can be a slave and still be a good Christian. You can, certainly, be Jewish. Being a Christian doesn’t mean you can’t be Jewish too. We might wonder why St Paul didn’t object to the existence of slavery, but certainly there is no suggestion that some people are less deserving of salvation than others. Indeed St Paul uses the mechanisms of slavery to illustrate how Jesus can set people free, literally.

But despite these innocent Bible passages, we know that anti-Jewish feeling is a very old thing. The Jews, as a race, have been blamed for killing Jesus. They have been called ‘god-killers’. Martin Luther was very antisemitic, blaming the Jews for failing to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. He was out of line with most of the other Reformers in this. After all, the story of Paul’s conversion and acceptance by the early Christians, even though he had been persecuting them - and Jesus’ own words from the cross, ‘Forgive them, they know not what they do’, and so on, go against any blanket condemnation of the Jews.

It is still an issue. In this country the Labour Party has been condemned for being antisemitic, although I think that I would make a distinction between being opposed to some of the actions of the modern state of Israel, such as the expropriation of Palestinian land and building ‘settlements’ in contravention of United Nations resolutions, being opposed to that on the one hand,

which seems to me to be legitimate, and being anti-Jewish in general. That distinction recalls Raphael Lemkin's definition of genocide, in that people who are antisemitic are against people because of what they are, rather than because of what they do.

St Paul's message of acceptance, of inclusion, is still very relevant. In some places when I was a boy, there were adverts which specified 'no blacks and no Jews' could apply. It surely couldn't happen nowadays. But there has recently been the EMPIRE WINDRUSH scandal, where our own government, Mrs May herself, the Prime Minister in her previous post, forcibly sent elderly black people to places in the Caribbean which they had left when they were children, left at our invitation, in order to come and work here. That recent scandal again shows people judging others by what they are - in that case, black people who have come from other countries - rather than by who they are or what they do.

The banal routines, the orderliness, of the Holocaust are still a danger, I fear. Very few people would just go and shoot someone: but what if you are a soldier and you are ordered to do it? Of course that was at the heart of the Nuremberg trials. The railway employees who drove the trains, who manned the signal boxes, who repaired the main lines, wouldn't normally be looked on as authors of genocide. But without their work, the poor Jews would not have been put in the concentration camps so efficiently and in such vast numbers. There were lots of innocent routines and ordinary jobs, which nevertheless made genocide possible.

The other great lawyer whom Philippe Sands celebrates in his book is Sir Hersch Lauterpacht, whose son was Sands' tutor at university. Lauterpacht developed the other great concept which was first used in the Nuremberg trials, the concept of crimes against humanity. The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights grew out of Lauterpacht's work, and was, by contrast with Lemkin's work, concerned not with crimes against

whole peoples, but with crimes against individuals. What was the true nature of the evil contained in the Holocaust? When the victorious allies were preparing to try the Nazi leaders, what was the essence of their crimes? It was an assault on people as individuals, on who they were, as much as on what they were.

These are still vital ideas. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his great command to us to love our neighbours as ourselves, and St Paul's message all through his letters that it doesn't matter what our origins are if we are to become Christians - these are so relevant today. When we hear people saying things against people because of what they are - foreigners, migrants, black people, say - and when we hear people saying that it's just too bad (but there's nothing which can be done about it) that many people don't have enough to eat, or can't afford medicines - those are the sorts of ideas which in the past have resulted in genocide.

Archbishop John Sentamu is starting to raise money for a bishop, Bishop Hannington Mutebi in Kampala, Uganda, who needs cancer treatment - which costs £155,000. What do we feel about that? We hope he gets the money, and the treatment. What if you weren't a bishop but still had cancer in Uganda? You are still entitled to be treated, because you are human. You have human rights. Perhaps it has taken the history of the Holocaust to bring it home to us how vital those rights are.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant.