

A Sermon for Holocaust Memorial Day

Epiphany 3 2008

Isaiah 9 vv 1-4, I Corinthians 1 vv 10-18, Matthew 4 vv 12-23

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

These are very familiar words from our beautiful Christmas services when we are thinking about the coming of the promised Saviour. We celebrate Christ the Light of the World, but do we consider the abject horror of the darkness in which the people walked, the terrible depths of the shadow of death in which they dwelt? Holocaust Memorial Day plumbs the depths of human wickedness and the suffering which is the inevitable consequence of our rebellion against the Love of God. We are asked today to remember the Nazi concentration camps and the extermination of 6,000,000 Jews. We do not forget the Nazi murders of gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally deficient and all those other human beings considered to fall short of the Nazi vision of racial purity. Neither do we forget the genocides and the crimes against humanity perpetrated throughout the world and throughout human history by the children of Adam, who is himself described as the son of God. There are, however, three reasons why the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews troubles us more than so many other equally horrific events in the story of the human race. The first is that the Nazi Holocaust took place within living memory. The second is that the German nation which attempted this genocide was a civilised, Christian, European country, not too dissimilar from our own. We are uncomfortably reminded that anti-Semitism was a familiar feature of English life for hundreds of years. To say that it could never happen here would be to claim that we English are somehow inherently morally better than the Germans – a claim of racial superiority to equal the arrogance of the Nazis. I am afraid that, given similar economic and political conditions, similarly horrific events really could happen here.

The third reason why the Holocaust of the Jews troubles us is because of the Old Testament. The Jews were the chosen people. God saved the Jews from Pharaoh. He protected Jerusalem from the Assyrians. He sent Cyrus the Persian to undo the work of King Nebuchadnezzar who demolished the Temple and exiled the principal inhabitants of Judaea. God provided Esther to prevent the evil Haman from carrying out a genocide of all Jews throughout the Persian Empire centuries before Christ. If God could save the Jews in the centuries BC, why did He not save the Jews in the C20 AD? And if God could save the Jews in the past, why does He not save the gypsies, the homosexuals, the mentally deficient, the Armenians, the Bosnian Moslems, the Zimbabweans, the people of Darfur or any of the other afflicted and oppressed races of humanity?

Three answers. The first is that God has entrusted the human race with freedom. We are free to choose good or evil. You and I face choices every day. We can be good or we can be bad. It is up to us. The German nation chose Hitler to be their leader and they carried out his mad, bad policies. Of course God knew that, when He gave us freedom, people would choose evil and that there would be terrible consequences. It was also His decision that making free people who could choose whether to love Him and to obey His Law of Love

was much better than making robots who would always do the right thing because they had no choice. Freedom is one of God's greatest gifts to us and He does not lightly take it away even when we use our freedom to do the most terrible things.

The second answer is that another great gift of God is the reliability of natural laws. He does not, for example, switch gravity on and off so that a dropped brick normally falls to the ground, but remains hanging in the air if it would fall on someone. A poisonous gas is always poisonous. God does not suddenly make it non-toxic when it used by bad people against good people. We might think that, if we were all powerful and all knowing like God, we could devise a world with much less pain and suffering. Harry Secombe used to sing *If I ruled the world, every day would be the first day of Spring*, but think about it. How could you have a first day of Spring if there were no 2nd, 3rd or 4th days of Spring? What would be the point of Spring with no Autumn, Winter or Summer? What would life be like in a world that was all Seedtime and no Harvest? OK, that is a trivial way of putting it, but I really do not see how we can say that we could devise a better universe than the one we live in unless we knew as much as God knows and, in that case, we should probably have to accept that this is in fact the best of all possible worlds.

Thirdly, how do we know that God did not intervene? Hitler's Reich was supposed to last for 1,000 years. In fact it came to an ignominious end in 1945. I believe that God does operate in our lives at the same time as respecting our freedom and without compromising the integrity of the natural world – but I cannot explain how this can be!

If we acknowledge the terrible depth of the darkness in which the people walked, what does it mean to welcome the Christ as the Great Light? He begins His preaching with the words, *Repent: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*. God is redeeming the world. If human beings want to share in that redemption, we must repent. We must turn to Christ. We must renounce evil. We must repent of all our sins.

St Paul preaches the Cross of Jesus. He says, *For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God*. None of this makes sense to the unbeliever, but the reality is that it is through the Cross of Jesus that God saves the human race, indeed the whole of creation. Christ is the Light of this dark world because of His supreme act of self-sacrificial love on the Cross, when He offered Himself for the sins of the world.

This is true for two reasons, the first much easier to understand than the second. The first is that Christ's offering of Himself on the Cross shows that He shares our sufferings. Whatever the reason God that does not put an end to human pain, we know that He does not leave us to suffer because He does not love us. In Jesus He shares our suffering. He becomes the victim of humanity's sins and He endures the consequent pain. This is a great mystery and a great comfort. We know that, when we pray, He is with us. He understands. He quite literally sympathises. He feels with us. We pray, whether for ourselves or for other people, knowing that the depth of His Love for us, His understanding, is His Death for us on the Cross.

The second point, which is very much harder to understand, is that Christ's Death on the Cross is not only in solidarity with the victims of human sin, it is also forgiveness for the sinner. And that is hard to understand. Why should the perpetrators of the Holocaust be forgiven? And yet it is in the nature of God that He longs for all people to be reconciled to Himself. He is the God *Who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live*. God not only shares the pain of the victims of human sin; He also makes it possible for the sinner to return to Him and be saved. And that is just as well because we are all sinners and we are all sinned against. We need a Saviour Who knows what it is to be the victim and is still able to forgive.

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. So what do we do about all this? In today's Gospel, St Matthew reminds us of those words in Isaiah about the Light that shines in the darkness. He records Jesus starting that work by preaching *Repent: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*. Jesus then goes on to recruit apostles to work with Him. So, there you are. Are you for Him or against Him? Do you help Jesus to gather the wheat into His Father's barns or do you scatter? Jesus is looking for an apostolic Church which continues with the task the Father gave Him to be a great light to a world walking in darkness.

If I had time, I could say a lot about the situation Paul addressed in Corinth, where the people of Jesus, the apostolic Church, had already fallen from their high calling and fallen out among themselves. You see those Corinthian Christians were only human – like you and me. Yet God could use them as channels of His grace, as people in whom and through whom the Light of Christ would shine in this dark world. So there you are and here I am, people who once walked in darkness, but have now been called out of darkness into His own marvellous light. It says that people like us *shew forth his praises*. We do so as we ourselves become the light of the world.