

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY



Holocaust Memorial Day

Forgetfulness can lead us to disaster. The things we refuse to forget, the things we resolutely remember, can work upon us for good. That is at the heart of faith. The constant reading and rereading of biblical texts is, in part, about remembering that we are rooted in a story with a past. We certainly must listen afresh to God's word in our contexts; seeking for the Spirit's word today within the many words. But we also want to anchor all we are and all we do in the faithfulness of God that spans all time rather than being the private possession of our little present moments. For me, that reality often comes home most fully as we gather around the simple meal of bread and wine. Here we remember an upper room in ancient Jerusalem, fearful and confused followers, an impending death upon a cross. We retell an old, often retold story. But we also locate ourselves within that story, confessing that the Son of God gave his life for us too, rose again for us too, lives amongst us too. These are things I never want to forget.

Holocaust Memorial Day each year on 27th January invites us to further remembering. It is difficult remembering. We remember things that pass beyond the capacity most of us have to imagine. It is not easy to enter in to the evil and abominable hatred that seeks to eradicate an entire population. It is not easy to picture six million collected from across Europe to be put to death for being Jews. It is not easy to imagine a host of others (Roma, gay, those deemed deficient mentally or physically) also going to be gassed and incinerated. And the remembering becomes, perhaps, a little harder as the years bear away the last of the generation who came out of the Nazi terror to tell their stories and give life to the dying. But, surely, that is why observing the international Holocaust Memorial Day becomes increasingly important? Forgetfulness can lead us into disaster.

I was stopped short by the findings of the survey carried out ahead of this year's observance by its organisers, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. They polled 2,006 UK adults. They found that 5% were sure the Holocaust was a myth; that it never happened at all. That scales up to 2.6 million across the entire UK population. A further 8% said the numbers killed were nowhere near the actual reality of six million,



Holocaust Memorial Day 2019: **Torn from home**



whilst two thirds of respondents said they had no idea how many died. This distancing from the truth, this forgetfulness, might be fertile ground for other sorts of seeds to thrive. The Community Security Trust is now recording over 100 anti-Semitic incidents across Britain every month, including acts of extreme violence. Our current political discourse has become increasingly harsh and divisive, unleashing forces of hatred and public scorn. All sorts of groups feel far less safe in the UK of 2019 than they have for many years. And, across the Europe that is so scarred by the marks of Holocaust history, extreme voices and policies gain increasing support in terrible echoes of the 1930s. Forgetfulness can lead us into disaster.

Holocaust Memorial Day forces us to deliberately remember. And it allows us to wonder where the forces come from that can turn neighbours against neighbours and, in the briefest of times, collapse communities into cauldrons of violence. Part of the horror of genocide is that so many involved in it can be such ordinary human beings; people like me. Part of the horror of the attack upon Europe's Jews is the way in which elements of Christian faith and practice and theological interpretation justified, over centuries, abuse of Jews. The Church, my home, helped hatred happen. And it has happened again and again. We remember other names and peoples: in Cambodia; in Bosnia; in Rwanda; in Darfur.

We must remember. In part we do so as one tiny way to offer dignity and humanity to those who have been slaughtered; we refuse to forget them. Recently, for the first time ever, the ashes and bone fragments of some killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau were buried in a Jewish cemetery in Hertfordshire. That was, in part, an act of dignifying the dead. We say their lives mattered. In part we stop to give ourselves thinking space to wonder at the world and at our place within its worst stories. This remembering, by rooting us in past events, then orientates us towards the future. It requires of us a response and a recommitment to playing our part to the full in refusing to deny or belittle the scale of past horror. It sets us, once again, upon the journey towards others,

towards deeper relationships with those we do not know, to building friendships and communities that can withstand the efforts to divide and to abuse. We remember, so that those who died might help us to live better.

Neil