

Holocaust Memorial and Genocide Awareness 2016

David Wills
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This year's 'Holocaust Memorial and Genocide Awareness' commemoration was held in 43 Lancaster Gate, London to draw together the human rights activists from a number of genocide issues to understand both the disparity as well as the common characteristics. We were very fortunate to have Rev Dr Marcus Braybrooke to begin the programme with his profound wisdom of this issue.

Holocaust Day 2016: Rev Dr Marcus Braybrooke

Holocaust Remembrance Day is always a difficult day – most of all for those whose loved ones were murdered and survivors who are still haunted by their nightmares. May our remembering be of some comfort to them.



If I focus on the Holocaust, it is because even to list the genocides of the last one hundred years would, tragically, take most of the evening: but I hope what I say may be relevant also to them.

My good friend Rabbi Hugo Gryn, whom some of you may remember of Moral Maze, was taken to Auschwitz as a teenager. People sometimes asked him 'Where was God?':

His answer was 'Where was humanity?'



On that day in 1944, I was at my place of work. Like many others, I fasted and cleared a little hiding place for myself amongst the stack of insulation board. I spent most of the usual working day there, not even emerging for the thin soup given to us at midday. I tried to remember as many of the prayers as I could and recited them, even singing the Kol Nidre, asking God's forgiveness for promises made and not kept. But eventually I dissolved in

crying. I must have sobbed for hours. Never before or since have I cried with such intensity and then I seemed to be granted a curious inner peace. Something of it is still with me. I believe God was also crying. And I understood a bit of the revelation that is implicit in Auschwitz. It is about man and his idols. God, the God of Abraham, could not abandon me, only I could abandon God.

Like a number of recent Jewish and Christian thinkers, it is, I believe, more helpful to picture a God who weeps with us rather than to talk of an all-powerful God who did nothing. When pictures of Vietnamese boat people were in the news, the Asian theologian Choan-Seng Song, in his book *The Compassionate God*, said God's face could be seen in the suffering of the Indochinese people. 'In the disfigured bodies of the children fallen victim to hunger and bullets, someone must have seen God disfigured with horror.' Through their pain God pleaded with the conscience of humanity. My own picture of God as suffering love has changed my attitude to war so that I am now committed to non-violence and it has convinced me

that penal policy should be more about reform than revenge. God has put into our hands the future and it is a terrifying responsibility.



Our picture of God matters. On the morning I started to write this, a report in the press began with these words. 'After prayers, the traders of Bab-al-Tob market in Iraq's second city Mosul, formed a crowd around nine men lying on the street... A bulldozer approached and slowly ran over the prisoners, crushing them.' (the 'I' 20.1.16). To what God had those prayers been offered? Certainly not to 'Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.' -- to quote the opening verse of the Qur'an

One rabbi said to me, 'In the nineties we prayed for

the revival of religion, now we wish we had not.' Those of us who are believers need to come together to challenge the idols that we put in the place of the true God.

But I meant to focus on Hugo Gryn's question, 'Where was humanity?' We can take this in the sense, 'Why did the world not prevent the Holocaust or the other horrifying genocides?' How did the Nazi's come to power. Neither the League of Nations, the press, nor the legal system, nor public opinion, nor the Churches had the will or the strength to stop them. Indeed, as a Christian, I am ashamed that centuries' of anti-Jewish teaching provided the seed bed in which the pseudo-scientific racism of the Nazis could flourish.



(Photo of Jonathan Blain who explained that the Holocaust had been very unkind to his family. He added that it was important to remember the Holocaust and try to prevent others from suffering in the same way.)

I know that many people did sacrifice their lives to defeat Nazism. But how should we respond to genocide? Military action in Libya, however well-meant, has precipitated more violence. Even those who back air-strikes against Isis, know that they cannot by themselves end the conflict. We need urgently to strengthen the United Nations and international law. People of faith and goodwill have a responsibility to try and shape public opinion so that governments take their international responsibilities seriously.

There is, of course, an immediate need for humanitarian help, as there will be for a long time. Part of humanity is there helping the refugees – but much more help is needed. But the rebuilding will need to be spiritual as well as material. Families have been torn apart, neighbours have turned on each other, for many people, nightmares of the past will haunt their future. This, I believe, is a call to the religions of the world to work far more closely together. Ma Ghosananda, the Cambodian Buddhist leader, told his fellow monks during the Phol Pot regime, to join the hundreds who had fled the country. The refugee camps must now be our temples and our monasteries.

'Where was humanity?' It is a question to each of us to look into our own hearts. Would we have risked our lives and the lives of our families to protect the vulnerable? Would we have given into the pressures to support the Nazis or at least to have kept silent? Would we, in different circumstances, have been perpetrators? The Vietnamese spiritual teacher, Thich Nhat Han, recognised the potential for good and ill in every human heart

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,

Who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,

And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

The rescuers and the perpetrators were ordinary people. SS officers cared for their families. Rescuers said they did nothing special.

There were probably many more rescuers whose names have not been recorded. Few of the rescuers seem to have had a particular concern for Jews. Many of them said that they did nothing special. It was how they would behave to anyone they saw who needed help.

Listen to the words of these rescuers

'I come from nationalist circles, often charged with Anti-Semitism. Why did I save Jewish children? Because they were children, because they were people. I would save any man [sic] in danger of death, and a child – every child – is particularly dear to me. This is what my Catholic religion orders me to do. A persecuted Jew somehow stopped being a Jew and became simply a man, woman or child in need of help.' (Quoted by Blumenthal, *op.cit.*, pp. 222-3, from E Kurek-Lesik, 'The Role of Polish Nuns in the Rescue of Jews, 1939-45. See also Eva Fleischner in *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, pp.156-7)

My family was Dutch and Christian. Even when we were quite young, my parents always encouraged us, my sisters and me, to read the Bible and to believe that love was the aim of our lives. My mother and father taught us that Moses got the instruction from God that tells us 'to love our neighbours as ourselves.' And we also know from the Bible that Jesus Christ, who was himself a Jew, had said that the greatest commandment was 'to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself.' Both at home and at school, our education was directed toward love, compassion and service of others.

Is that how we would describe our educational system, which seems geared to exams and careers?

'Where was God?' 'Where was humanity?' These are questions each of us have to answer for ourselves. God grant that in doing so we contribute to the healing of the world – tikkum olam. Perhaps we can take encouragement from the words of Abe Foxman, a survivor, who wrote that for fifty years we who survived bore witness to the evil, brutality and bestiality. Now it is time also to bear witness to goodness. For each survivor is living proof that even in the hell called the Holocaust, there was goodness, there was kindness, and there was love and compassion.'

We must never give up hope that the world can be changed.