



British Council of Christians and Jews: 70 Anniversary Dinner

30.11.2011

On Tuesday 15th November, Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks was guest speaker at a dinner and reception celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Council of Christians and Jews. The charity's patron of 60 years, Her Majesty The Queen, was the guest of honour accompanied by His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh. To mark the 70th anniversary of the formation of The Council of Christians and Jews, the Chief Rabbi also delivered the "Thought for the Day" broadcast on BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

The following is a transcript of Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks' "Thought for the Day":

Seventy years ago, in the midst of one of humanity's darkest nights, Archbishop William Temple and Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz came together to light a candle of hope. Jews were being massacred in vast numbers by the Nazis, and Temple believed that Christians had to take a stand. Hertz concurred, and thus was born the first national interfaith organisation in Britain, the Council of Christians and Jews.

Today we take interfaith activity for granted. We forget what a leap of imagination and courage it took in those early days. For the better part of two thousand years the relationship between the church and the Jews had been marked by a hostility that added a whole series of words to the vocabulary of human suffering: disputation, forced conversion, inquisition, auto da fe, ghetto, expulsion, and pogrom.

For Jews and Christians to come together both sides had to overcome deeply entrenched attitudes of suspicion and fear. Yet they did. Temple used the BBC World Service to make a broadcast to the Hungarians to rescue Jews wherever they could. He delivered an impassioned address in the House of Lords in 1943, saying that Christians stood before the bar of history, of humanity and God. This was religious leadership of a high order, and we still benefit from it today in the form of the hundreds of interfaith organisations that now exist throughout Britain, creating friendship across the boundaries of faith.

A simple example: A synagogue in Swansea was vandalised, and its holiest objects, the Torah scrolls, were desecrated. As soon as people heard about it, a local Christian group came together to help the Jewish community repair the damage. When I officiated at the reconsecration, more than half of the congregation in the synagogue were members of local churches.

And of course the work has spread beyond Jews and Christians. The day after 9/11 one of our rabbis, the late Leonard Tann, went to the Imam of the largest mosque in Birmingham and said, these will be difficult days for Muslims and I want you to know that the Jewish community will be standing with you. Birmingham became a role model of how the leaders of all faiths worked together to promote good relations.

There are places in the world where religion is still a source of conflict. In Britain, not always but mostly, faiths estranged for centuries now meet as friends. We owe much of that to the pioneering work of the Council of Christians and Jews whose example continues to inspire today.