Traces of the Holocaust

31/01/2017 | Michael Ipgrave*

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It is very difficult to know how to speak in the context of the Holocaust; part of me feels that the space allocated to this lecture would best be filled by simple silence. We struggle to articulate tales of human suffering and loss which almost cannot be told, because they are so painful; and behind them lie tales of human wickedness which almost should not be told, because they are so abominable. Multiply those tales by millions, and you begin to approach the devastation and the horror of the Holocaust. This is an immensity too much for us to take in, and sometimes it is the smaller signs which give us access to an insight we can assimilate more easily. Over the years, I have organised, or been involved in, several visits to Central or Eastern Europe to explore the legacy of historic Jewish communities, and the traces of their brutal elimination in the Holocaust. I want to reflect, as a Christian, on some of those experiences now – three scenes in particular.

1. Wandering around the streets of some ancient city – Krakow, say, or Budapest, or even some cities in Germany – occasionally I have come across old houses with rectangular shaped indentations on the side of their doorposts. These little marks are easy to miss, but I find them very telling, because, as you will realise, they are the signs of a vanished Jewish community. The indentation marks the point where the Jewish family who lived there placed their *mezuzah*, the small case containing a parchment scroll inscribed with the words of the Torah, in accordance with Dt 6.9: 'Write [these words] on the doorposts of your house and on your gates'. And you can be fairly confident that a Jewish man who lived in that house would probably have strapped on his arm when praying the small boxes called *tefillin* or 'phylacteries', also containing Torah texts, in accordance with Dt 6.8: 'Bind [these words] as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead'.

And what were these words? In both *mezuzah* and *tefillin*, the scrolls include, among other passages, the words of the *Shema*, Dt 6.4-9: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might …' I have heard that described as the 'Jewish confession of faith', and so it is in one sense; but it is more than that. I remember once seeing a young man on the tube in London who had just come from an exhibition at the Science Museum about Sir Isaac Newton. He was wearing a splendid tee-shirt which declared, in bold capitals: **GRAVITY – NOT JUST A GOOD IDEA, IT'S THE LAW**. And so it is for the texts in *mezuzah* and *tefillin* – not just suggestions, they are commandments. They are instructions which God gives to his people, to the people of Israel, and also to the people of the New Covenant; and as we remember the Holocaust, Christians and Jews together, we need to remember that we are bound by that common command.

In one passage in the gospels, Jesus is asked by a Pharisee, a lawyer: 'Which commandment in the law is the greatest?' In reply, he does not try to give a smart new answer, to replace the answers that have gone before. Rather, he gives the answer encapsulated in *mezuzah* and *tefillin*, the rule by which Israel lived: 'You shall love the Lord your God'. And he adds to that a second commandment, from Lev 19.18: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. Like many rabbis of his time, Jesus brings together different elements of the Torah, giving priority to some over others, just like his older contemporary, the great Hillel: 'A Gentile approached Hillel, asking that the rabbi provide him with a summary of the Torah while standing on one foot. Standing on one foot, Hillel

said: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Law; the rest is commentary; go and learn what this means.”’

So Jesus spoke as a rabbi giving his opinion in a debate about the Jewish Law. That should remind us of the importance of that Law in the purposes of God. Jesus did not say that it would be a nice idea to love God and our neighbour; he did not say that to do so would bring us happiness and fulfilment; he did not say that the world would be a better place if everybody were to follow an ethic of love; on the contrary, his teaching was cast quite clearly in the language of law – ‘This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ We Christians are always in danger of making a too easy distinction between Law and Gospel, of thinking that Law is harsh, restrictive, A Bad Thing, and Gospel is gentle, enabling, A Good Thing. Hidden in attitudes like that – not so hidden, maybe – is a latent contempt for the religion of Israel, a view that caricatures and then dismisses Judaism and Jewish people as legalistic, calculating and untrustworthy. That is a danger of which we need to be particularly aware this year as we mark the 500th anniversary of the start of the Christian Reformation. The insights of Martin Luther brought renewal and a fresh sense of individual accountability to Christian spirituality, but they were easily distorted into a facile anti-Judaism, and sadly Luther himself in his later years expounded viciously hateful attitudes to Jewish people, adding to the churches’ teaching of contempt that shaped the background to the Holocaust.

For thousands of years through the history of Europe, despite attitudes like that, Jewish communities witnessed to their faith in God and their love for God quite literally by writing and displaying these texts of the Law on their houses and on their bodies; in many places they still do so today. And for thousands of years they witnessed to that faith and that love quite practically by devoting themselves to the study of God’s law and by seeking to direct their lives by its commandments, and in many places they still do that today. A love of, and an honouring of, scholarship was so pronounced in Jewish life in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it was said of the Jews there that ‘they were drunk on learning as other nations are drunk on alcohol’ – an attitude captured well in an old Yiddish song that speaks of the *bethmedresh*, the study room attached to a synagogue:

See the peasant run into the inn to catch a drop of brandy;

See the Jew run to the *bethmedresh* to snatch a page of *Torah*.

2. But in this gathering today we are remembering the Holocaust. In my second scene, I am standing in the ruined shell of a synagogue, or in the Museum of Galician Jewry in Kazimierz, the historic Jewish neighbourhood of Krakow, with its stunning photographic collection of ruined Jewish sites across southern Poland. Nearer to home, you can see some very evocative images of the Holocaust here in Lichfield, in a small exhibition in the chapel of St John’s Hospital, featuring photography by our own Sheriff, Robert Yardley. These are scenes of destruction and devastation, yet something persists. Building on centuries of Christian anti-Judaism and decades of modern antisemitism, the Holocaust was a deliberate attempt to wipe out that people who witnessed to divine faith and love, and it almost succeeded in Europe – but not quite. Whether or not it is right to describe the Nazi ideology as a form of atheism, or a variety of paganism, the Nazi war against the Jews, because it was a war against the people called to be Israel in the world, was a war against God: the God of Israel who had called his people into being and sustained them in a world of sufferings.

Other groups too were murdered by the Nazis: for example, Roma and Gypsy people, homosexual

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people, people with mental or physical disabilities, people of different races, people with particular political opinions, other people too. Other groups had been murdered in genocides before the Nazis, notably the Armenians, whose fate may well have diabolically inspired the Holocaust. And in turn millions of others have been murdered since the Nazis in genocides around the world – Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, Syria, to name only some. It is vitally important that today we remember all those victims of so many different genocides, carried out under the pretexts of so many different ideologies.

But to get any sense theologically of what these, and other, genocides mean, I believe that we have to come back to the Nazi mass murder of the Jews, for that campaign was an attempt to wipe out from the world the name of the God of Israel. That attempt failed; but standing in the shell of some devastated synagogue in Galicia has brought home to me just how costly, how destructive was the satanic hatred it expressed. In an essay on his hometown of Krakow, Rafael Scharf tries to express the sense of a great void which this war on the God of Israel left in Polish society. Quoting from one of the great Polish poets of the later twentieth century, he writes:

‘There is a multitude of them – nowhere’ says Jerzy Ficowski. That crowded, eternal absence is far more tangible here than anywhere else in the world.’

The synagogues and cemeteries of Kazimierz speak powerfully of a community, a culture, a whole civilisation in miniature which has disappeared, leaving behind a void which is a profoundly spiritual reality. It is desperately important when encountering these footprints of the past to try to re-imagine the vitality, the warmth and the diversity of the communities which once flourished here – and to recognise that that vitality warmth and diversity still continue in other parts of the Jewish world, and are not wholly absent from today’s Poland. Yet still there hangs over it all the word of 1 Sam 4: *Ichabod*, ‘the glory has departed’.

However, it is also, and extraordinarily, in Kazimierz, that the retrieval, re-creation, even re-invention, of Jewish life is most marked. There is a well-attended annual Festival of Jewish Culture; synagogues and cemeteries have been carefully restored; Jewish restaurants and bookshops proliferate; an excellent Center for Jewish Culture has been established. All these things testify to a felt need to fill the ‘Jewish space’ in the midst of Polish societyThis is something found across Europe, particularly in the central and eastern parts of the continent, as Ruth Ellen Gruber showed in her fascinating book *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*. She points out the reservations felt by many Jews about this process, particularly when the agents of the process of re-imagination and reinvention are predominantly Gentiles, and still more so when the ‘Jewish cultural products’ being produced deviate substantially from any recognised norms of Jewish culture. Still, as she says, the liveliness of the growth of a ‘virtual Jewry’ in central and eastern Europe points both to the magnitude of the ‘Jewish space’ in European culture, and to the way in which Jewish heritage is not restricted in its significance to Jews alone.

For Christians, the continuing persistence of the Jewish experience has a theological, and not merely a cultural significance. Long ago, St Augustine described the role of Jewish communities for Christians as being *librarii nostri,* those entrusted with the guardianship of the scriptures on which we rely, yet which we do not possess. Modern Catholic theology prefers the language of *nostrum sacramentum*: the Jewish people are for us a ‘sacrament of otherness’ without whom Christians cannot experience the revelation of God. Paradoxically, my reflections on visiting the vestiges of Jewish sites after the Holocaust is that the depth of just such a sacramentality can be served by a real absence as well as a real presence: even when Jewish communities have disappeared, the space they create is so poignantly powerful that it mediates the reality of that otherness through which we encounter the holy one.

3. My third scene is not at all poignant; it is numbing, dull in its heavy sense of threat. It is thebleak site of the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, with the railway tracks leading up to the sidings

where the so-called selection was made: some selected to a short life of unbearably hard labour in unspeakably brutal conditions; others selected to immediate, painful and degrading death in the gas chambers. Here we see the final, deadly results of the evil of antisemitism, born of a deadly nexus of racial and religious hatred, issuing in a genocide against the Jewish people which must not and cannot ever be forgotten. One of the reasons we are here is, simply, to remember those who were slaughtered as a result of a nation's and a continent's failure to check and combat antisemitism. We are here in deep sorrow, to remember.

Yet remembering those who have died is only one side of the picture. Today, 27th January is Holocaust Memorial Day, marked as such in many countries around the world by people of all communities; the date is chosen to commemorate the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops on 27th January 1945. But in the State of Israel, and in Jewish communities around the world, the principal day marking these events is the 27th day of Nisan in the Jewish calendar, eight days before Israeli Independence Day. And while that day is usually referred to in shorthand as *Yom ha-Shoah*, 'Day of the Holocaust', its full title is *Yom ha-Zikaron la-Shoah ve la-Gevurah*, 'Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and of Heroism'. The added words are significant, for they recall the reality of Jewish resistance to Hitler's Final Solution – most dramatically in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, but also among partisan groups in the forests, and even in Auschwitz itself, where the *Sonderkommando*, the work battalions formed from Jewish inmates, staged a heroic though doomed revolt in October 1944. It is important to remember that Jewish people were not only victims of the Shoah, but also brave combatants against the encroaching evil of antisemitism. Equally, we have to remember that those baptised as Christians were not only perpetrators, accomplices and bystanders in the Holocaust, but some of them too also stood up against its evil ideology. Such courage, both Jewish and Christian, is an integral part of the humanity which we have to celebrate together in the face of the Shoah.

So, as we honour the dead, we acclaim those who resisted evil. Our mood today has to be one not just of wistful sadness, but also of renewed determination. And that determination is needed now as much as ever, perhaps in some ways more needed now than at many other times. The last couple of years have seen a growing wave of antisemitism across Europe, and our own country has not been exempt. And antisemitism in turn has been accompanied, as it so often is, by other forms of hatred, resentment and suspicion directed against any groups who can be targeted as being in some way different. In the face of this, today asks of us both remembrance and vigilance. At stake is the fundamental truth that Jews and Christians hold in common: that men and women are made in the image of God. To demean, to hate, to plan to destroy our fellow men and women, whatever their race or religion, means nothing other than to demean, to hate, to plan to destroy the God in whose image they are made – though nobody can destroy God whose life is indestructible. Seeing the image of God in all people, we are commanded to love all – a commandment to which Jewish communities still bear witness, despite all that God's enemies tried to do to them in the Holocaust. In the words of the *Mishnah*:

Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world.

And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world'.

* The Right Reverend Dr Michael Ipgrave, OBE, is Bishop of Lichfield and

CCJ Chair.

Source: The Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ), Great Britain.

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