

St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 24th January 2016

3rd Sunday of Epiphany / Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD)

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Luke 4:14-21

this coming Wednesday, 27th January, is Holocaust Memorial Day, which we've not marked before at St. Mary's; but I do recall being in Israel on the occasion of HMD there some years ago

we were driving along a motorway, when sirens began to sound; the traffic slowed to a standstill, people got out of their vehicles and stood in silence till the sirens sounded again; our 2-min silence on Remembrance Day is one thing, but this is quite different: the entire population comes to a halt, wherever they are, to remember the losses of the Holocaust: the death of 6 million Jews under the Nazis

so HMD is about that particular piece of history, that is still very much alive and painful to the touch for many people; but it's also about recognising present acts of genocide and violent persecution, in the hope that we will never again stand by, while groups or nations are terrorised or annihilated

it is the role of the 'bystander' that is highlighted in this year's materials for HMD; because, they say, the holocaust and other genocides are made possible by those who stand by and watch, rather than standing up and doing something about it

on the HMD website you can read the stories of some who did not 'stand by', but took the risk of stepping in and taking action, to resist oppression, or to rescue the oppressed – even if it cost them their lives; a few examples:

the Sonderkommando were Jews, mainly, forced to work for the Nazis in the concentration camps, doing terrible tasks – some resisted and paid the price

closer to home, Sir Nicholas Winton died last year, full of honour, at the age of 106; he brought 669 Jewish children out of Czechoslovakia just before the outbreak of WWII; according to the website, 'He was an inspiration to many people, all around the world. He humbly insisted that anyone would have done the same. But they didn't. Most people stood by'

a more recent example: Carl Wilkens was the only US citizen to remain in the Rwandan capital of Kigali during the 1994 genocide. He, and his wife Teresa, chose not to stand by when the Hutu extremists tried to wipe out the Tutsi presence from the country.

holocaust survivor, Ellie Wiesel, wrote this: 'I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.'

how does this commemoration sit with our continuing Epiphany theme, of Jesus being revealed? so far our focus has been on who Jesus is – the Word made flesh, the Prophet, the Priest, the King, the teacher, the worker of miracles

today's gospel reading directs us to what Jesus has come to do, and the values of the kingdom that he announces; this story from Luke 4, of Jesus in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, forms a kind of 'manifesto' at the start of Jesus' public ministry

Jesus returns from his 40 days in the wilderness, having wrestled with temptation; and now, seeing the path clear before him, he is ready to begin, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to do the work God has sent him to do

he is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, but it seems there isn't a fixed 'lectionary' passage that he is supposed to read; so Jesus chooses these verses from Isaiah 61, that begin, 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...'

so far, Jesus is very much in the tradition of the rabbis, that goes back to that reading of the Law in Nehemiah 8, where Ezra read the scriptures and the words were interpreted for the whole people to understand

so here, amongst the ordinary, familiar people of Nazareth, the familiar words are read, and they wait expectantly for his commentary on them – just like St. Mary's congregation listening attentively to my sermon!

but Jesus does what I would certainly not presume to do – he declares these words of prophecy to be fulfilled, right here, right now, in their hearing, before their very eyes:

'the kingdom is here, among you now, and these are its values, this is what it is all about: good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and the oppressed set free'

this is a list of people looked down on in the society of that time, those pushed to the margins, regarded as less than human, and not worthy of respect or dignity; much as the Nazis regarded Jews and many others in their time

who would we put in our list today? migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, homeless, drug addicts, ex-prisoners; all sorts of people we can so easily regard as somehow 'other', and 'less' than ourselves

Jesus' manifesto is freedom and healing to all these; that is what he's come to proclaim, and that is what those who follow him are called to live out too, to be 'good news' to those on the margins of society

but this is not without risk! like those who refused to 'stand by' in the holocaust or other genocides, this stand of Jesus will have consequences; just read on in Luke 4 to where his own people want to throw him off a cliff; or indeed take the story to its logical conclusion – the cross itself

as the 'Word made flesh', in Jesus God makes himself vulnerable; he does not 'stand by' while the world goes to ruin, nor does he intervene from a safe distance – dropping a few bombs to make humanity sit up and take notice; in Jesus, God gets stuck in, resisting oppression and rescuing the oppressed, even at the risk of his own life

at best, that teaching and example of Jesus have motivated Christians down the centuries to acts of service and self-sacrifice for their fellow human-beings, even when those have been quite 'other', even when has meant loving their enemies; and the tension we feel, between that vision of God's kingdom of justice and peace, and the suffering and injustice of our world, should lead us to an increased desire to make a difference for good, wherever we can

being willing to take the risk of doing that is a key part of the message of Holocaust Memorial Day

but it is also a reminder to us not to get drawn in to a rhetoric of rejection and hatred of the 'other'; there are plenty of voices clamouring, both here in the UK and elsewhere, that we should close our borders, batten down the hatches, shut ourselves off from the 'other', and, potentially, then also mistreat those in our midst who don't quite fit – and that has a familiar and very sinister ring to it!

someone emailed me recently asking me, as a Christian, to support 'Britain First'; do you know it? I checked it out online and had to reply that, as a Christian, I could do no such thing; it is simply not Jesus' way to separate

Paul was dealing with similar attitudes in the church in Corinth, where one group looked down on another, pushing them to the margins as 'inferior' in some way; he counters this in his letter with his image of the body – many parts, with different functions, but all vital to the well-being of the whole

no part can say, 'I don't belong in the body'; no part can say to another, 'I don't need you'; if one part suffers, so do the rest; if one part is honoured, all rejoice with it: this is a picture of true 'interdependence' in the church, that should be a model for the kind of community and world we want to work for

so, how can we act, and not stand by, in such circumstances? visit HMD website for current examples, e.g. trying to raise awareness of genocide in Dafur (Sudan), or campaigning over violence against women around the world, or just resisting the rhetoric of hatred and exclusion in our own society

a quote from the HMD website: 'We cannot all be heroes, but we can all try to do something to make a difference, to not stand by, as our fellow human beings are suffering. Today in the UK we are not facing genocide, but we all still have a responsibility to be aware of the risk of genocide elsewhere in the world, and to challenge hate crime and persecution here in our own country.'

at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, after talking at length about the unity of the body and the gifts of the Spirit, Paul ends by urging us to 'strive for the greater gifts'; we find out what those are in the next chapter – the great chapter on love; in the end, that is all that matters – to live out the love that Jesus shows and teaches us