

Rev'd Daniel's Sermon:

This coming week, our nation commemorates Holocaust Memorial Day, and the theme for this year is Light in the Darkness, something we all sorely need after such a turbulent year. After having spent a week in prayer for Christian Unity around the world (so essential given the hatred and disunity and prejudice that has marred the history of our faith), it is important to look now and remember the catastrophic effects a lack of love, inclusion, and unity can have... and the importance of acceptance, radical inclusion, and unconditional love for each other and for all people.

I remember at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and museum in Israel, seeing a large quote from St Augustine which read: 'Do not murder the Jew, simply expel him from your midst.'" His mentor, St Ambrose, was also vehemently anti-Semitic, opposing intermarriage, and once pleading with the emperor not to force a group of Christians to rebuild a synagogue they wantonly burnt down, arguing it was: 'a home of unbelief, a house of impiety, a receptacle of folly, which God Himself has condemned.' The most seminal of Christian theologians, preaching the love and compassion of Christ, were nonetheless susceptible to discrimination and prejudice. And their attitudes and surviving writings would have a profound effect on the course of European history and the Catholic Church, including centuries of Christian anti-Semitism.

For the next 1500 years, Jews were labelled 'Christ-killers' and regularly suffered blood libels, expulsions, forced conversions, and massacres. Entire communities of European Jews were wiped out during the Crusades; and in the years of the Black Death, tens of thousands of Jews were murdered in cities, forced to flee because of scapegoating. We have also witnessed scapegoating in this current pandemic as well.

Sadly, the Christian anti-Semitism of the Middle-Ages was continued by the Protestant Reformers. Martin Luther called Jews 'the devil's children' and 'envenomed worms', encouraging people to burn synagogues and Jewish prayerbooks, seize their property, and forbid Rabbis from preaching. Tovia Singer, an Orthodox Rabbi, recently wrote: 'there was no mouth more vile, no tongue that uttered more vulgar curses against the Children of Israel than this founder of the Reformation.'

Martin Luther's influence on German culture and religion in the following centuries cannot be overstated. He was regarded as a prophet and most scholars view his teachings as a blueprint for the exponentially more aggressive and frightening anti-Semitism that followed. The German Kingdom of Prussia was founded on four basic principles: military might, submission to authoritarian rule, anti-Semitism, and Protestantism. These tenets stem from Luther and, sadly, would lead eventually to the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.

Although none of the Third Reich leaders were actually Christians, most of them were still baptised and raised within the Lutheran or Catholic Church – the two main denominations in Germany and Austria. The Nazi religion (if it can be called that) was a bleak and grotesque mix of Darwinian human

eugenics and Nietzschean neo-paganism. No light in the darkness. Only blood, hatred, and death. But Lutherans and Catholics still permitted the rise of such evil; although, the full extent of the failings and involvement of the Church in the Holocaust will probably never be known, one thing is certain: this unspeakably horrific genocide was the culmination of 1500 years of Christian anti-Semitism.

Most of us call it the Holocaust (from the Greek holokauston) meaning a 'burnt sacrificial offering' in a temple, but the Jewish community prefer the Hebrew word Shoah, meaning 'catastrophe'. Roma people, historically known as gypsies, murdered in the hundreds of thousands call the genocide the Porrajmos, 'the Devouring'. How is it that the Christian Church, no denomination or tradition innocent, created the environment for, and stood by and watched, such a catastrophe, this devouring of human beings created in God's image?

How should we have been light in that time? They were, in fact, many examples of light in the darkness of those days.

Karl Barth, a leading member of the Confessing Church in Switzerland and one of the most important theologians of the last few centuries, wrote the Barmen Declaration – an opposition of German Christians to the Third Reich. His friend, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another theologian, also stood up to Hitler and died in Flossenbug concentration camp. Father Maximillian Kolbe, now venerated as a saint, volunteered to die in place of a total stranger in Auschwitz. These holy martyrs, a Lutheran pastor and a Catholic priest, were light in the darkness of that time, who did not give way to apathy, submission, or inaction like so many Christians then.

How can we follow their example – and be light in the darkness today – in such a season as this, of pandemic, and great cultural, political, and social changes?

In our Gospel reading for today, we hear of the Wedding at Cana where the first of Jesus's miracles was performed. It is a Jewish wedding. Mary, a Jewish woman, says to the servants at the wedding: "Do whatever he tells you." This advice is for all of us, speaking to us through all time. We are to do whatever Jesus tells us. And what are the greatest commands he gives? To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and to love one another even as we love ourselves. Martin Luther King Jr said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Since the Holocaust there has been much healing between Judaism and Christianity in Europe and around the world. Much light in the darkness and love in times of hate. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s abolished the term 'Christ-killers' to describe Jews, seeking rather to appreciate how Jesus, Mary, and the Apostles were all Jews. The Council also accepted that not everyone had to be Roman Catholic to be saved, but that any Trinitarian Christian baptism: Anglican, Protestant, or Orthodox, was a legitimate Christian baptism.

They even went so far as to say that the Missio Dei, the mission of God, being far greater than the mission of the Church, meant that it was in God's power to save anyone, even people of other faiths. More recently, Pope Francis urged Christians to stop proselytising Jews, arguing from Scripture that Jews are still God's people, and will all be saved.

In our Genesis reading, we hear of Abram's strange encounter with the mysterious Melchizedek, priest-king of Salem. Although he is entirely unrelated to Abraham's family and descent, Melchizedek is still priest of El Elyon, God Most High. There are many examples of righteous Gentiles like Job, Rahab, Naomi, Naaman, the Syrophenician woman, and the Roman centurion... people deemed lesser or unworthy because of their ethnic origin who are nonetheless held in high favour by God, and come to know him, despite not being members of his covenant.

We must not make the mistake in thinking that today's world is any different from back then. Although, since the New Covenant of Jesus, the idea of God's people is no longer restricted to a particular ethnic group, but now embraces all people – Christians still, sadly, often have contempt for non-Christians, and even Christians of other denominations and traditions from their own. Although anti-Semitism has, for the most part, disappeared from most major Christian denominations, it has sadly been replaced by Islamophobia, homophobia, among many other forms of racism, fear, hatred and discrimination.

This is not unity. This is not light in the darkness. Jesus wanted us to be one as he and the Father are one. He desires us to love one another unconditionally and self-sacrificially, as he did on the cross for all humanity; and as Bonhoeffer and Maximillian Kolbe followed his example.

I would like to finish with a prayer for Holocaust Memorial Day written by Archbishop Justin Welby, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, and Senior Imam Qari Asim.

Loving God, we come to you with heavy hearts, remembering the six million Jewish souls murdered during the Holocaust.

In the horrors of that history, when so many groups were targeted because of their identity, and in genocides which followed, we recognise destructive prejudices that drive people apart.

Forgive us when we give space to fear, negativity and hatred of others, simply because they are different from us.

In the light of God, we see everyone as equally precious manifestations of the Divine, and can know the courage to face the darkness.

Through our prayers and actions, help us to stand together with those who are suffering, so that light may banish all darkness, love will prevail over hate and good will triumph over evil.

Amen