

## **Mattins Sermon Epiphany 4 2010**

A guard at Auschwitz reported that at the height of the genocide 10,000 people a day were being taken to the gas chambers. In the face of such incomprehensible evil Jewish theologians, after the war, retreated into silence for many years. And for anyone to try and reflect on the evils of Auschwitz or the genocides of Cambodia and Rwanda, or the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans – is like treading on holy ground. Speaking about evil and suffering carries with it a terrible risk of trivialising what happened. However, this week has marked the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and Holocaust Memorial day so I am going to try and say something, albeit briefly, about why great evil seems to recur so relentlessly in our modern world.

And we begin with the personal. William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury during part of the Second World War, used to talk about the parable of perspective. He meant by this that each of us sees the world from our own centre, from our own perspective. One result of this is that the world is filled with colliding egos that never see themselves as they really are. This lack of a true perspective allows us to excuse behaviour in ourselves that we would find quite unacceptable

in others. And this accounts on a personal level for some of the evil hypocrisies that occur. In 1963 22 former guards at Auschwitz went on trial and were convicted. The curious thing about the trial was that the defendants confidently and consistently denied that the camp was anything other than a place of “protective custody”, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This wasn’t simply mendaciousness but more self-deception on a grand scale. It’s of the same order as those who acted as Nazi guards in the camps during the week and then reverted to being church-going Lutherans on Sunday. The prophet Jeremiah knew nothing of the parable of perspective but he put it more bluntly when he said: “The heart is deceitful above all things”.

Alongside this personal dysfunction, though, evil also springs from the corruption of communities. We are all aware that our personal identity is, to some extent, shaped by our relationships and interaction with others. “No man is an island”, and all that. Theologians have taken this further and said that this interconnectedness with others has a wide spiritual dimension. We are influenced at a profound level by the words and actions of others. So when people make wrong, destructive choices it affects more than a few individuals, spiritually it affects communities too. Dr. Martin

Israel, a priest and psychiatrist, has written that the accumulation of negative words and actions produces a poisoning of the spiritual atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being. This in turn drags people, institutions and societies towards yet more evil choices and actions.

And the church is not innocent in this process. Take the issue of anti-Semitism. One scholar has written: "The church made the Jewish people a symbol of unredeemed humanity; it painted a picture of the Jews as a blind, stubborn, carnal and perverse people, an image that was fundamental in Hitler's choice of the Jews as a scapegoat" (Leech Pg. 396). The point here is that the horrors of Auschwitz did not spring out of nothing – they were, in part, the conclusion of a profound spiritual sickness to which the church contributed and, in part, the bitter result of wrong, destructive choices in European history.

Having said that the depth of evil seen in Auschwitz and other genocides is such that it is, I think, impossible to account for it in human terms alone. The famous American psychotherapist Scott Peck learned in his training that there was no such thing as evil. As he practiced psychiatry he was forced to change his mind as he faced things so dark that

they could only be described in terms of a supernatural evil that can take over individuals and societies. St. Paul witnesses to this in today's N.T. reading when he says: "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh...but against the spiritual forces of evil". And when this supernatural evil combines with a monstrous human ego and accumulated past wrongs then the result can be the horror of Auschwitz or the Stalin purges.

Given, though, that such evil is potentially always with us what is our task as Christians? The gospel writers picture the crucifixion of Jesus as an experience of evil at its worst. But, the N.T. says that one death, in a small M.E. country, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century also has significance for all people, in all times. Jesus' confronting of evil with all-consuming love has made a cosmic difference. Nothing can now ultimately separate us from the love of God. And Jesus' particular struggle has eternal significance, not least, because we are interconnected, we coinhere. And for that reason our own particular struggles for good are not insignificant either. When we make time to pray for peace it makes a difference to others. When we act in love and justice it makes a difference beyond our own parochial world. That's why it matters that

we try and follow the teaching of Micah and “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God”.