

Liturgical and Homiletic material for Christians



HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY 27/1

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY 2018

Theme: The Power of Words

Introduction

Words can make a difference – both for good and evil.

'I want to go on living even after my death! And that's why I am so grateful to God for having given me this gift, which I can use to develop myself and to express all that's in me. When I write I can shake off all my cares; my sorrow disappears; my spirits are revived.' Anne Frank, written in her diary, 5 April 1944

Spoken and written words from individuals, corporations, community organisations or the state, can have a huge impact, whether good or bad. The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) 2018 explores how language has been used in the past, and how it is used in the present day. HMD activities can focus on the impact that words had in the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, through propaganda used to incite, through slogans written in resistance, and through memoirs written to record and respond to what was going on.

The words that we see and hear all around us today – in newspapers, online, in conversations – the words that we chose to use, all have an impact upon us and those around us.

The resources created jointly by the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) are intended to offer a range of materials which explore the theme for 2018. They can be integrated into 'regular' worship or combined to create a special commemorative service.

CCJ was founded in 1942 by Chief Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz and Archbishop William Temple. The aim of CCJ's work is to celebrate the history and diversity of both communities; facilitate constructive dialogue; enable meaningful learning experiences; and provide opportunities for transformative change. This engagement takes place in communities across UK through 31 branches as well as through national programmes, including Holocaust education and an annual seminar at the International School of Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland is a fellowship of more than 40 churches across the four nations of Britain and Ireland. A successor body to the British Council of Churches, it aims to foster greater unity between the churches in various aspects of Christian life and witness.

Further resources for Holocaust Memorial Day 2018 can be found by visiting the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust's website: www.hmd.org.uk. An educational booklet by Peter Chave *The Holocaust: Its relevance for Every Christian* is available from www.ccj.org.uk.



Holocaust Memorial Day 2018

Since 2001, the Government has invited British society to observe 27 January each year as Holocaust Memorial Day. 27 January is the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops.

Holocaust Memorial Day is intended to provide an opportunity for reflection on issues raised by all atrocities, especially those events officially designated as genocides. The mass murder of millions of people of different ethnic, cultural, religious and political groups in more than one genocide provided the darkest side of twentieth century human history. While the remit of the day is wide-reaching, its focus remains the Holocaust. Although many

others perished as a result of Nazi actions, Holocaust Memorial Day provides an opportunity to especially reflect on the fate of European Jewry, for whom Hitler and others held a particular hatred.

Christians have also been among the perpetrators of genocide, as well as among the bystanders, and indeed the victims. Holocaust Memorial Day can give us cause to remember the reality that evil is still powerful in our world. It can strengthen our resolve to protect every community from discrimination, intimidation and violence.

SUGGESTED LITURGICAL MATERIAL

Opening prayers

Creator God, in the silence of the beginning:

You spoke and the world awakened.

Companion God, in the chaos of life:

You spoke and lives were healed.

Redeeming God, in the opportunity of today and the hope of tomorrow:

You speak and we are here to respond.

These responses are based on the Jewish blessing on hearing bad news:

Blessed are you, Lord

God of all creation.

Through your goodness we have this time

To gather to learn the truth of ourselves.

We cannot always feel joy for this life

We know too much of lives that have been broken.

Give us courage when we hear tragedy, despair and death

To bless you, the one true Judge.

Amen.

Living God, you speak through priest and prophet, through friend and stranger, through all of us and in every situation in which we find ourselves. Help us, O God, when we fail to hear the cry of pain or ignore the warning signs of evil. Speak through us O God so that by our words and our actions we may reflect your highest calling and do our utmost for good.

Amen.

Prayers of confession

God our Father, you called the world to live in peace and community with each other. But we lack the courage to challenge injustice.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

God our companion, you journey with us through heartbreak and joy. But we forget your words of peace and despair takes us.

Christ have mercy.

Christ have mercy.

God the Spirit of life, you brought the world to being. But our actions make life fragile and breaking.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

God the three in one, you reveal yourself in our lives and you show us how far we are from realising God's desire for the world. If we confess our sins you are faithful and just and you will forgive us. So we offer our confession to you and pray for forgiveness and healing, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Prayer activity

Candles may be lit, as an act of remembrance or as part of the prayers of intercession. Churches may wish to light five candles: for the victims of the Holocaust and for victims of genocide in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur.



Rabbi Mark Solomon lights candles at Chichester Cathedral

Prayers of Intercession

God of all people everywhere, we bring to you our prayers for the world and for the people of the world.

Lord in your mercy,
May we hear your word.

Lord through every time and in every place, we are confronted by the staggering depth of history's legacy. Memories haunt us of lives broken and hopes destroyed. We pray that you will comfort those who are held back by their experiences, strengthen those who fear the future, guide the search for life when all else seems lost.

Lord in your mercy,
May we hear your word.

Lord of the familiar and of the far away, we pray for people across our world who suffer today through poverty, hunger, disease, war, and genocide. We pray for peace and reconciliation so that even in the most hopeless of situations, the cries of the suffering may be heard.

Lord in your mercy,
May we hear your word.

Lord of choice and action, we pray for the decision-makers of our world. Guide those who have authority to make change happen. We pray that the common good will empower individuals and transform divided communities.

Lord in your mercy,
May we find life.

Lord of memory and hope, we thank you for the testimonies of those who experienced history, who witnessed suffering and who champion the causes of freedom and justice today. We pray that their lives may be an inspiration to us so that we may never forget history and work to challenge injustice wherever it may be found.

Lord in your mercy,
May we find life.

Finally, Lord of every human experience, sometimes words are too little to describe the confusion of loss, the pain of suffering or the despair of the unknown. So let us sit in silence now to offer the prayers of our hearts.

Silence

Lord in your mercy,
May we find life.

We pray together the words that have sustained God's people through centuries:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

Benediction

As we go from this place and into the world, may we: speak the truth, listen and watch for injustice, and commit ourselves to change and hope for righteousness' sake.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.



Auschwitz. Photo by Bruce Thompson.

COMMENTARIES

The commentaries below are provided for the lectionary readings for Sunday 28 January (Fourth Sunday of Epiphany). All Biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Here we see Moses' last words to the people of Israel, which were also intended to guide them in the future. His are words of power and hope that call the hearer to belief and a life lived according to God's instruction.

Prophets were people who were chosen to speak God's words. How do we know if someone speaks for God? Is an individual promoting their own social or political agenda? This is an age old question.

A few verses earlier (Deuteronomy 18:10-11) we see prophets of the Lord described as the mouthpieces for God. Their proclamations are made without the common acts of divination or speaking to dead spirits. The key role of the prophet was to declare the word of God to the people.

The power of words is such that in the wake of events in Paris, Barcelona and Manchester last year, slogans like I ♥ Manchester caught the public's imagination. Words have the power to make or break people in an instant. One only has to think of how words were used in the Rwandan genocide to initiate crimes against neighbours.

Prophets, as we have read, are selected by God for the sake of the people (vv. 15; 18). They answer to God, not to the people, so they are free to speak the truth. But note the prophets come 'from among their own people' (v 18). These home grown speakers know the ways and the hearts of their people, therefore they can connect with them. Their words have power to build up or destroy. So, just as words were and are used to oppress, we are compelled to ask ourselves how we will challenge words and attitudes that for some have become the "norm". We should nurture and encourage one another to speak powerful words of peace that reflect love and hope and that challenge injustice.

So, how do we know who is speaking God's words? Prophets speak of issues that are eternal and face every generation in times of crisis and challenge. The truth of words may not be known in this life. Perhaps, this is where faith comes to the fore. We can all be led astray by words. Often the vulnerable and weak can be exploited and great evil can be perpetrated as a result. Our challenge is to listen to God and act on his words faithfully.

Revelation 12:1-5

The words 'crying out' in v.2 of this chapter evoke great suffering. This verse may relate to the growth of the church at the time it was written and hint at the suffering of the challenges which faced the early Church.

Cries of agony are prayers from the heart. They are powerful beyond other words. When we consider the history of the Holocaust and genocides since the Holocaust, we might feel that cries of agony continue unabated. They can express the deepest suffering and pleas from our hearts. In times of severe persecution people of all faiths call out in pain: powerful cries that need to be heard. It only need take one individual to listen. For when words are spoken, they require a response.

The question for people of faith is this: are we prepared to hear and take note of the cry of anguish? When we counter injustice whether it be genocide or other atrocities do we walk on by? Or do we stop and listen and make the just response?

The power of words is in the moral response they demand.



Um Zeifa, Burning village, Darfur. Photo by Brian Steidl

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

There is general agreement that people feel much safer with boundaries. They may be cultural, religious, national even rules that make for peaceful living in our homes. We know what we find 'acceptable' and what is forbidden to us. However, when we become adults these boundaries are so engrained that we often find it difficult to cross them. We feel safe with what we 'know' is right.

Do such boundaries become barriers that are too difficult to cross? May be we don't even attempt to breach the boundary of talking to someone from a different faith or community. What are we afraid of? Barriers can isolate and reinforce stereotypes. The only thing our barriers succeed in doing is cutting us off from the rich diversity and endless opportunity of the world beyond our selves.

This passage addresses these issues. Here Paul is addressing the Church in Corinth, living in a setting that was filled with all kinds of beliefs and lifestyles, just like today. This leads us to

consider whether Christians isolate themselves from the world around them, or do they engage with the richly diverse world which is a melting pot of religions and cultures?

On one hand Paul found himself in agreement with the freedom of engaging with a diverse pluralistic world. His faith was strong enough to withstand this. It was rooted in his knowledge that there is only one true and living God, and that Jesus set all of us free from our fear of the world in which we live. Indeed Jesus constantly crossed all kinds of boundaries. He was not afraid to engage with the world around him.

Having said this we note that in the passage that some of the believers in Corinth were crossing some boundaries. Paul does not seem to be happy about this. Some of the Corinthian believers were joining their friends at ritual meals in the temples of pagan idols. This was a step too far for Paul, he would not cross that barrier. What barriers should we cross and which ones are taboo from crossing?

Should we be all things to all people? Or should we at least seek to listen and understand and know others, no matter who they are?

As we think about the horrors of genocide we remember that many vulnerable people were drawn into carrying out atrocities as well as those who lost their lives. What stance do we take when such events occur? Do we assimilate into what is going on around us and accept the status quo? Or do we engage with diversity and see the need to challenge what needs to be challenged as Jesus did?

The message of Epiphany is that God is here, wherever we are, drawing us into a life that sets us free from barriers and unbreakable walls. God does not want us to live in isolation and certainly not in communities that don't engage with one another. The message that we are charged to proclaim is one of love, hope and inclusion. At this time we remember Jesus before he flees as a refugee to Egypt just because of who he was. God calls us to share the powerful message of love, hope and inclusion not isolation and persecution.

Mark 1:21-28

Who are seen as authority figures today? So many people claim to really know what they are talking about. Such strong characters often impress the vulnerable with their charismatic persona resulting in opportunities for the weak to be abused and manipulated. In this reading we see something different. Here we see Jesus recognised for who he was. He was not only recognised but so was his authority in his words of power.

Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum where it says that 'they were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority (v.22). Not only that, but Jesus' ministry demonstrates that his actions lived up to his words. Can we say that our words match our actions? Do we practice what we preach?

Jesus' powerful words also strike to the core of our very being as illustrated by the unclean spirit leaving the man. Have any words been so powerful that they have resonated in the

core of our very being? Jesus' words are words of life. This is often called the witness of the Spirit where God affirms the word of Jesus.

How often have we been in the presence of someone who speaks with authority? What attributes do they have? What is the difference between those people and the dictators and perpetrators of evil, in the past and present, who demand allegiance by exploiting people's fear? How do we as Christian respond to authorities that have and still are exterminating thousands of people?

In this passage we are confronted with the unclean spirit which can be seen as a metaphor for the presence of evil in human history. Evil today challenges us with the same words in the text 'What can you do?'

Jesus replied: 'Be silent and come out of him.' We read that he was not so much meek and mild but spoke with a steely authority. When we are confronted with evil and it stares us in the face, just as those in the history of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, are we going to allow the evil to continue or are we going to stand and speak out with a moral authority that comes from God?



Jewish refugees on a train