

Sunday 25 January 2009: The Conversion of St. Paul and the Week of Holocaust Memorial Day

Stand up to Hatred.

Readings: Acts 9. 1-22; Matthew 19.27-end

Two weeks ago I heard Thomas Buergenthal on 'Midweek' describing his experiences as a young Jewish boy who survived Auschwitz. He has just written a book called *A Lucky Child*.¹ He was later to devote his life to international human rights law and is presently a judge at the International Court of Justice in the Hague. As I listened I was struck by the voice of a man seeking out strains of humanity even in the very depths of human suffering. On the radio he told the story of an execution he had witnessed as a child prisoner in the camp where he was held. Some Jews had been caught trying to escape and were handed over to the Gestapo. Some days later gallows were erected in front of their barracks and these prisoners who had tried to escape were brought out, so badly beaten that they could hardly walk. All the Jewish prisoners had to line up outside to watch the executions while the condemned were made to stand on wooden chairs under the nooses. The Gestapo then forced an equal number of the inmates to come forward to put the nooses over the heads of their condemned Jewish brothers. It was part of the humiliation. He said "One inmate I saw was trembling so violently that he could not lift the noose over the head of the condemned man. Then we saw the condemned man bend down and kiss the hand of that inmate." He whispered something in his ear and put his own head through the noose. Buergenthal said it was as if that small act, that kiss, in the face of overwhelming evil gave them all strength, a strength that seemed to defeat the tormentor who furiously kicked the chair away as one deprived of a victory. It was something he has never forgotten – a sign of human dignity and hope in the face of horror.

St. Paul writes: "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called both Jews and Gentiles. Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." These are hard words to understand. They seem to point towards a God not revealed in the powerful of the world but in the vulnerable; a God revealed not in hell fire, bombs and military might and torture, but in acts of love, compassion and powerlessness, and upon a cross abandoned by the world. Today is the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul discerns "How God chose the foolish in the world to shame the wise; and how God chose the weak in the world to shame the strong."

St. Paul proclaimed the liberating love of God. He wrote some of the most beautiful and important passages in the whole Bible and yet his words have sometimes been used to justify the oppression of women, homophobia, anti-Semitism and slavery. The one who discovered on the road to Damascus that he

¹ Thomas Buergenthal: *A Lucky Child* ; Profile Books 2009

was persecuting Christ has been used and is still being used to persecute others. Words intended to set us free and become words of life can in the wrong mouths become words of oppression and death. This seems to be a tragic trait of all religions when they become ideologies of fear and condemnation rather than service. The fact that Paul, the greatest of evangelists, had his own confusions and blind spots is perhaps a warning to all of us that none of us are saved by our own righteousness but only by the grace of God and to beware of the blindness our own idols bring.

In our Gospel today Peter in his question gives voice to the most basic of religious temptations. He asks what is this religious calling for? What is in it for us? How will we profit from our Christian faith? Is the cost worth it? What does it promise except suffering and loss? Peter asks: “Look we have left everything and followed you, what then will we have?” Jesus in his answer does not promise material reward but promises that those who answer his call will one day sit with the Son of Man in his glory and will have life, eternal life. Eternal life is difficult to describe because actually it has to be lived. The great South African Missiologist, David Bosch, identifies three key aspects of Paul’s calling, each of which remain crucial if our religion is to bring life²:

First, Paul’s sense of deep empathy and concern:

Paul knows deeply the lost-ness of humanity who have not recognised the love of God. He sees the pervasive idolatry of the world. Idols are fabrications of the human mind which promise reward and fulfilment but take control of people and lead into slavery. Paul sees the love of God in complete contrast, as living and true. Paul’s Gospel is good news. He knows it from his own life. Conversion brings the convert from the realm of death and unreality into the realm of life, the reality of God. It sets free.

Second, Paul’s sense of Responsibility:

Paul says “Woe to me if I did not preach the Gospel.” He experiences Christ like a charge laid upon him. It is the reciprocation of the gift he has received. It is part of God’s justice that having been given life himself he must help others to enter into that life too. This is the mission of God: to bring life. The freedom of his service is not a matter of discretion; it can be no other way. Paul is saying that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people and it is his sacred obligation to proclaim that gospel.

Thirdly, and at the deepest level, Paul’s sense of gratitude:

He is prepared to go to the ends of the earth because of his overwhelming experience of the love of God received through Jesus Christ. In Galatians he writes “the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me” and to the Romans “God’s love has been poured into our hearts.” His debt to God is not some

² David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission*; Orbis; 1999

miserable duty, it is an act of thanksgiving. The blessing of grace he has received becomes the energy and the spirit with which he reaches out to others.

How often we feel completely powerless to take part in this mission: underwhelmed rather than overwhelmed by God's power to transform. Today, as we remember the conversion of St. Paul, we also remember to Holocaust Memorial Day. In the service broadcast on the radio this morning from this church we were reminded of the words of the Bishop of Leicester who said that visiting Auschwitz with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi last November felt deeply uneasy because it was like looking into a mirror and seeing what human beings are capable of doing to each other and are still doing to each other. Human lives continue to be tortured and destroyed while we justify or look away. We preach a crucified God: the power of God revealed as a mirror held up, a mirror calling for transformation and change; a crucified Christ longing for resurrection and that his people, all people, may have life. And like Paul we too have a message to proclaim: perhaps as small as a kiss in the face of death. This is true religion, not the religion of hell but the religion of life, offering words and actions of life to one another.

Today from this Church on Radio 4 Lionel Blue said "I learnt from the Holocaust to beware of crude nationalism; love your country and your culture but don't try to love your own by loving others less. That way lies murder whether in the Balkans, the Holy Land, the Congo, or wherever." Rabbi Lionel Blue said "I no longer cared if God was all powerful or all anything. It was enough to watch his goodness at work transfiguring people."

As we hold up the horror of the Holocaust as a mirror, none of us can forget the cycles of fear, hatred and death which continue in Israel and the Gaza. Yesterday's 'Guardian' carries the following report : "Only now after most of the dead have been buried, is the first properly researched reckoning of the toll emerging. What stands out is the striking cost borne by children of Gaza who make up more than 1.5 million people living in this overcrowded strip of land. The Palestinian death toll after three weeks of Israel's war was 1,285 according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights of which more than 280 were children."

Yesterday's 'Guardian' also reported how the BBC has refused to broadcast an appeal by the Disasters Emergency Committee representing 13 aid charities, for help for the humanitarian emergency in Gaza, for fear it would risk public confidence in the BBC's impartiality.

Thomas Buergenthal, who I quoted at the beginning of this address, says that to speak of the Holocaust in terms of numbers of the dead, in the way it is usually done, is unintentionally to dehumanise the victims and to try to quantify the tragedy in terms of statistics. The number transforms the victims into a mass of nameless, soulless bodies, rather than the individuals they were – each one made in the image of God.

Longing to save the people of Gaza does not mean we love the other side less.
Each individual - made in the image of God, a God who longs for each of his sons
and daughters to have life and to speak words and actions of life to one another
and to stand up to hatred.

After this service a retiring collection will be taken for the Disasters Emergency
Committee appeal for the people of Gaza.