

**Hinde Street Methodist Church**

Sunday 24 January 2021

11.00am Richard Shepley

**'Be the light in the darkness': a sermon for Holocaust Memorial Day**

*Psalm 43*

*James 1-: 17 and 22-27*

*Matthew 5: 15-16*

Soon after the end of the Second World, in a cellar in which a group of Jews had hidden from persecution, these words were discovered written on the wall in French: 'I believe in the sun even when it is not shining/ I believe in love even when feeling it not/ I believe in God even when He is silent.' I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. Such words reflect a deep sense of faith, a persistent belief that day will follow night, that the lost will return even when we cannot see that which has been lost, that there will be an end to suffering, and a future day of rest and peace. It is the image of the human yearning for light which conveys this faith: an ancient resolution that even the darkness of moments can be illuminated and transformed by just a little glimpse of the light.

On Wednesday the world will mark Holocaust Memorial Day. The theme for this year's Holocaust Memorial Day in the UK is 'Be the light in the darkness.' Be the light in the darkness. And I'd like us to reflect on that theme this morning. What does it mean to be the light in the darkness in the history of the Holocaust, and in our own post-Holocaust world? And how can we hold on to the faith that the sun exists, lives, and shines again, even when we are hidden from its view?

Of course, the symbolism of light is a powerful one in the context of the Holocaust. We might think of the famous photograph from pre-war Germany where in the background a Swastika flies on a public building, but in the foreground, on the window sill, a menorah candle sits defiantly on display. Or we might remember the persistence of religious practice even in the ghettos and concentration camps of Nazi-occupied Europe. Or there are the stories we know of the few—the very few—brave Christians who embodied light in darkness as they risked their own lives in order to save the lives of their Jewish neighbours.

Light can be a symbol of faith. In scripture light is also a motivating metaphor. In different ways the Biblical writers have used light to inspire the faithful into acts of love for God and for other people, and this is true in different ways in the three readings which we have heard this morning. I'd like to briefly comment on each of them in turn.

So, firstly, Psalm 43: 'O send out your light and your truth: let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.' As the psalmist indicates, God's light is a guide, a beacon by which our journey is illuminated for us: in leading us towards a dwelling place with the divine the light of God is thus in a tangible sense the hope we hold on to when all else is dark.

My friend Eva, who seventy six years ago this Wednesday was liberated from Auschwitz-Birkenau, had an older brother, Heinz. When the Nazis invaded Holland, Eva was celebrating her 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, and Heinz was almost 14. In 1942 the family was forced into hiding but they couldn't all hide together: the risk was too great. So, Eva and her mother went to one hiding place and Heinz and their father to another. Eventually, in May 1944 they were betrayed, just three months before Eva's classmate, Anna Frank, also hiding in Amsterdam, was likewise arrested. During one of Eva and Heinz's last conversations on the train which would take them to Auschwitz, Heinz revealed to Eva that under the floorboards of his hiding place he had secreted a small collection of his own poems and paintings. Heinz and their father did not survive the Holocaust. But when Eva and her mother returned to Amsterdam after the war they discovered that the poems and the paintings had survived, hidden under the floorboards.

In 2019, for Eva's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, Heinz's poems were finally published. The collection is titled *Pondering in the Dark*. They were, often, written in the dark: the dark of the hiding place from where even a chink of light might have meant disaster for Heinz. But light could not be eliminated from Heinz's mind. He wrote, in July 1942: 'Lord, where are the sparkling stars/ Light, salvation, help me fast.' Heinz's poems reveal a deep emotional—and at times, incredibly painful—yearning for light. The light glimpsed through the window of his hiding place, whether 'sparkling stars' or 'the first ray of sun' in spring, represents all of Heinz's hopes for a safe and free home.

And yet, in his final poem, days before their arrest, Heinz wrote: 'Look inside yourself for what are called feelings/ For no matter how little you might know/ In your own world, you are the king ... And write about the battle within your soul/ About a love effervescent in your heart...' There is a glimpse here that Heinz discovered his own inner light, the light which gave him hope.

We learn, from Psalm 43, of the home that is God's city, His holy dwelling place, the 'city upon a hill' as another would call it. And as the psalmist indicates, light and 'hope in God' lead us there. So we too must pray that in our searching for light we might fashion a world which may be a dwelling place for those who long—as did Heinz—for a home where they can know God's hope. Heinz did not live to see his paintings and poems become recognised for the works of art that they are. But as we hear his words today the light he envisioned has not been extinguished.

Light therefore, firstly represents hope.

Secondly, the reading from James. What a fascinating passage this is. For me, it sums up so much of the paradox of faith in the history of humankind, not least in the story of the Holocaust. We could spend this whole sermon—indeed the whole day—remembering the inspiring Christians who saved Jews in the Holocaust. But there is another story, a story of those numberless baptised Christians upon whose actions or upon whose refusal to see would ensure the Holocaust happened. In the face of such knowledge of the past we might be tempted to give up: the darkness can be overpowering.

The reading from James, however, sets us a challenge. The light of God illuminates ‘every generous act of giving, every perfect gift’, he writes. Acting as a light in the darkness challenges us to be the ‘doers of the world’—not those who listen and preserve our lives without risk as separate and unaffected by the concerns of others, such as those Christians who did nothing to help their neighbours during the Holocaust. Light should encourage us to challenge those who ignore genocide to this very day, those who prefer to placate an economic superpower rather than acknowledge the crimes done against the Uighur people. The light of God calls us to encounter the truth in all its discomfort and not to deny it; to extend a hand to the different and the stranger and not just those who look or sound or think the same way as us; and to be the doers who through our acts of love will challenge the evils of this world.

Jane Haining was a Church of Scotland lay person who taught in a school for Jewish girls in Budapest. When war was declared in September 1939 Jane Haining was actually on holiday in the UK. Ignoring the Church in Edinburgh’s orders to stay home, Jane returned to Budapest and repeatedly ignored the Church’s pleas over the next two years that she return. As she wrote in her final refusal of these orders: ‘If these girls need me in times of sunshine, how much more do they need me in these times of darkness?’

Eventually, Jane was arrested by the Nazis and transported to Auschwitz where she was murdered. It is said that in the cattle truck and in the camp she showed a particular care for Jewish girls who had been separated from their families. Jane Haining demonstrated that though the world may be moved by forces seemingly beyond all our control, there is even in the darkness a chance for sunshine to break through. And sometimes the sunshine is glimpsed even in as tiny an act as taking the hand of a child. Many of the girls in Jane’s care survived the Holocaust. As James writes, when we act in goodness, from God’s light ‘there is no variation or shadow.’

Heinz’s poem demonstrated light as hope. Jane Haining’s courage is just one example of light as the act of love.

Finally, we come to Matthew’s account of the Gospel and this well-known passage from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: ‘No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.’ Jesus’ teaching here, I think, is that faith is a flame which might flicker in the winds of challenge and change but by which hope and love can spread, and encourage others, and multiply, and our own holding on to faith—no matter the darkness which threatens to extinguish it—that persistence of faith will have an incalculable impact we cannot even imagine.

One final story. It was the night of Hanukkah in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, and it came time to light the candles. But this was Bergen-Belsen: there was no lamp, no candles, no oil. But instead, a wooden clog became a lampstand, strings pulled from a camp uniform the wicks, and shoe polish: oil. So, a group of Jews in Bergen-Belsen gathered in a small crowd to mark Hanukkah. The rabbi lit the first light and recited the first blessing. He lit the second light and recited the second blessing. And when he came to light the third light he paused and looked around him as if searching for something, before lighting the

third light and reciting the third blessing. Afterwards, a Mr Zameitchkowski, a Polish Jew from Warsaw, elbowed his way to the front of the crowd and confronted the rabbi: 'Rabbi', he said, 'I can understand why you light the Hanukkah lights in these times. I can understand why you recited the first two blessings. But the third? How can you, here in the midst of the death and the destruction of Bergen-Belsen, thank God and say "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has kept us alive, and hast preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season"? How could you say that when so many of our fellow Jews are dead?'

The rabbi paused a while and then he said: 'Mr Zamietchkowski, you are right. When I came to recite the third blessing I also hesitated. What should I do with this blessing? But I turned my head and I noticed that behind me was a crowd of living Jews. If these people, when during the lighting of the Hanukkah candles, see before them their deceased beloved relatives, and still, despite all that, stand with devotion in listening to the Hanukkah blessings, if I was blessed to see such a people with so much faith, then am I not under a special obligation to recite the third blessing?'

Years after the liberation, the same rabbi, now living in New York, received a letter from a Mr Zamietchkowski, to tell him that his reply, in front of the light of candles on a dark night in a bitter winter in Bergen-Belsen, had stayed with him as a source of strength throughout all the challenges of the years since.

The light of hope, the light of love, and here, finally, the light of enduring faith.

Our lives and our circumstances may feel vastly removed from the stories I have shared this morning, and it would be understandable if in some ways we felt that they were difficult to hear and to apply in our own lives. But the darkness is real for the one who suffers it. And in every generation we are given the opportunity by God to light a candle—a candle of refuge and hope as Eva's brother Heinz searched for in the sparkling stars, a candle of truthful love as Jane Haining held on to as tiny fingers reached out to hers, a candle of blessing and of faith despite all the odds. These three candles can illuminate a whole world and change it beyond imagining.

I have been blessed in my work and in my study to meet survivors of the Holocaust, like Eva, and children and grandchildren of the young men of these islands who liberated Bergen-Belsen. Their stories live with us, as we all have been blessed by those who have revealed God's light to us in the darkness of our lives. By remembering their stories—stories of darkness but also stories of hope and love and faith—and acting ourselves in the light of God's love, we can illuminate an entire world. In so doing we can also live up to the inspiration of the psalmist and of James and of Jesus of Nazareth. And, ultimately, in this way, though the Jew who sat in a cellar during the Holocaust may be known now only unto God, we can remember their life and affirm our same faith in that sun which—no matter how dark the night—will shine again in the morning.

Let us pray:

God of the thick clouds and the sparkling stars, God of the creeping dawn and the noonday sun, God in darkness and in light, we pray that you will bless those who remember; comfort

those who mourn; inspire those who search for truth and justice; and walk with us as we stumble on into a new morning. And may we your people *be* the light in the darkness: the light of hope, the light of love, and the light of faith.

Thanks be to you O Lord our God, Amen.