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In Memory of the Holocaust: We Have Come a Long Way¹

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We have come a long way.

In fact we have come such a long way that it is difficult to imagine the events of a half-century ago. They are like a nightmare of bizarre tortures from which we have thankfully awakened. That is why the living witness of survivors and their progeny is such a precious gift which present and future generations must cherish so that no one can cultivate the illusion that it was *just* a dream.

For we have come a long way—

from international indifference to the annihilation of Jews and the now infamous Canadian dismissal, “None is Too Many” — to a Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

from pious Good Friday meditations about Jews who killed Jesus and the eternal curse they must bear as a consequence — to official Church statements of regret for theological scapegoating and for ecclesiastical passivity during the crucial years of the Holocaust;

from signs banning dogs and Jews — to a society in which discrimination of any kind is promptly exposed and publicly rebuked.

And of course, the State of Israel is a reality as substantial today as it seemed a hopeless fantasy 50 years ago.

We have come a long way. And even as we celebrate these *pub-*

lic milestones, significant as they are, we should each look back to measure the distance we have travelled *personally*. And we can say, perhaps, *I* have come a long way.

The midwestern ethnic enclave which was my home had almost no Jews. The closest a Jew ever came to my family was the classmate of an older sister who was declared by my parents to be off limits to her, for reasons I did not understand at the time. As a child, my introduction to things Jewish was limited to barbarisms of colloquial speech: for example—a phrase that is now difficult to voice aloud—“jewing down” the price of an item at the store; another, the name for the local scrap buyer operating from a horse-drawn wagon, the “sheeny”. Jewishness was that sketchy and that distorted.

My education in the fifties, only brief years after the end of the war and the discovery of the death camps, did not once deal with the Holocaust—nor with Jews nor with Judaism. It was as if Jews existed only in the past as the somewhat menacing figures in the Gospels. My theological training, impossible as it now seems, included little about Judaism other than a self-serving assumption that Judaism was mindlessly legalistic—a convenient foil for Christians. So we spoke about Pharisees and “Judaizers” as representatives of a contemptible religion of outward show and no inner substance. There was never a hint that our Christian tradition had a long history of anti-Judaism; and there was only a brief nervous defense of the revered Reformer, Martin Luther, acknowledging his raging obscene attack on Jews when, it was said, he was an old, sick and disillusioned man. We never did read Luther’s actual words. I do not remember asking to read them. I dug them out of the University library recently; ironically, I found an English translation of them in a rank propaganda piece against Germans published in England during the war.

In 1995 my Church officially acknowledged, rejected and apologized for Luther’s invective against Jews. And for years it has incorporated a far more wholesome study of Judaism into its theological training of pastors and its educational materials for members.

Collectively, we have come a long way—our institutions have changed. And, personally, we have come a long way—our awareness and understanding are not, thank God, what they were.

And yet...and yet...

For many, the Holocaust is no longer seen as a profound guide to truth that would otherwise have escaped us, a sign that says we must stop and learn something here. Rather the Holocaust has come to feel like a barrier to truth, like a millstone hanging around our necks, holding us back and inhibiting honest discussion.

In a book published in 1992, N.T. Wright, a conservative English New Testament scholar, wrote of this inhibiting effect of the Holocaust:

Western Christian scholarship is in the middle of a long-drawn-out process of repentance for having cherished false views about Judaism. Scholars and preachers tumble over one another to say that they were misguided, that they misjudged the Pharisees, that Jesus and his first followers had no quarrel with the Jews...How long it will be before things settle down again, it is difficult to say.

Wright himself believes that this unfortunate but understandable drag on Christian scholarship is something scholars must eventually get over: "But we will do ourselves a grave disservice if we think that simple reaction will do any lasting good. The historical task cannot be accomplished by the back-projection of modern guilt feeling...."²

The Holocaust, in other words, is the cause of an unfortunate, if inescapable, interruption in the ongoing scholarly quest for Christian self-understanding. We cannot, in good taste, ask all the questions we would like to ask, pursue some lines of investigation, express the consequences of some of our research in a forthright way. For now, it is the Christian task to keep a respectful silence, and wait for a more appropriate time.

As one who has lived on the edges of academic theology for the past ten years, I have often observed this submerged reticence and glimpsed the unexpressed frustration and resentment hiding there. It is as if it were being said, "We must tread lightly here; we must screen our thoughts and choose our words carefully. And certain sleeping dogs we must be careful not to rouse." A few years ago at a meeting of Christian clergy, when this Christian Service in Memory of the Holocaust was announced to the group, one of my peers let this resentment surface: "I'm sick of hearing about the Holocaust, year after year after year after year; when are we going to hear the end of it!"

I speak here to my fellow Christians. I remind you that this is a *Christian Service in Memory of the Holocaust*. We do not hold this service just for the sake of Jews. We do it also for our own sake. We do not remember the Holocaust out of some generous impulse to share with our Jewish neighbors the pain of their terrible memory. The memory is also ours. If this were not so, there would be every reason for the common complaint: Why just the Holocaust? What about Cambodia, Somalia, the victims of Josef Stalin, aboriginal peoples around the globe?

We Christians remember the Holocaust, *must* remember the Holocaust, because it is an event in *our* history. And it is not just a single, isolated event. It is the culminating event in a long history of denigration, persecution, displacement, denial of rights of Jews by Christians, not just by the Hitlers of Christendom, but by those we call saints—Ambrose and Chrysostom, those we claim as inspired leaders—Martin Luther, those who shaped the theology and practice of the Christian Church.

We remember the Holocaust, *must* remember the Holocaust, because we need to learn what it is in our tradition that is the source of that terrible history. And we need to do this *for our own sake*.

Those who feel the Holocaust has become a millstone around our necks—holding us back, inhibiting what we can say, keeping us from the pursuit of the truth—have not yet grasped this fact: the Holocaust is as much a pivotal event in *Christian* history as it is in Jewish history. It is not just sympathy that is required here, but insight. It is not just tender feelings about Jewish sensibilities that make us think twice before we speak, but honest perplexity about the mysterious poison latent in our own tradition.

This millstone can become a milestone, a marker of progress. In order for that to happen, our internal conversation about our own religious heritage must take place in the presence—actual or implicit—of the other. This means to study, to preach, to teach, to worship, to pray as if the other were in the same room. When I study the Gospel of John, I need to have Jewish ears there to hear along with me the 71 times that John refers to Jews, most of them hostile. I need that Jewish presence so that I feel the sting of this litany and cannot avoid dealing with it. When I worship, I need to be aware that the borrowing of Jewish circumlocutions for the divine name in the

Gloria of our liturgy can sound more like polemic than praise: "for Thou alone art the Holy One, Thou alone art the Lord, Thou alone art the Most High, Jesus Christ with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father." We need to preach, teach, worship as if the other were in the same room.

Back in 1981, at the first Christian Service in Memory of the Holocaust in the Toronto area, Sister Maureena Fritz of the Sisters of Zion proposed four "lines of action": 1. Insert a day of remembrance of the Holocaust in the Church's liturgical calendar; 2. Open a chair of Jewish studies in each Faculty of Theology; 3. Publish a New Testament with footnotes explaining texts that could be interpreted in an antisemitic way; 4. Officially recognize the State of Israel.

All four still make sense. I would emphasize the second: Establish a chair of Jewish studies, filled by a Jewish scholar, in each Faculty of Theology. To convert those stubborn millstones that remain into milestones, we need to study, to teach, to preach, to worship, to pray as if the other were in the same room. For as a matter of fact, we *are* in the same room. We share space in a small world. What we have spoken hitherto among our own kind, we must now speak out loud to each other, so that we can learn what we need to about ourselves and travel together even further along the road to mutual trust.

Notes

- ¹ Sermon preached at the Eighteenth Annual Christian Service in Memory of the Holocaust at St. Peter's (Erindale) Anglican Church, Mississauga, Ontario, 26 April 1998.
- ² N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 148.