

Last weekend we celebrated one of the joys of family life, the marriage of our elder son Anthony. His bride being Polish, the wedding took place in Poland, in the historic city of Krakow. It was a great joy to be able to conduct the ceremony myself in the Lutheran Church of St Martin using the liturgy of the Church of Ireland in a mixture of English and Polish. Krakow, with the royal castle of Wavel, many beautiful Churches and a magnificent Main Square bustling with life at all hours of the day and night, is a beautiful city, listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. As with any such place there were any number of trips on offer to different places of interest.

One such trip was to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Situated just over an hour's journey from Krakow, it is of course synonymous with unspeakable brutality, human suffering and degradation. So last Monday morning we set off on our visit. I had taken a copy of this Sunday's lessons with me to glance over during the week; the verse that had caught my attention was the verse out of our Epistle:

'God has said,

"Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you."

So we say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13)

Those words kept recurring in my mind as I listened to our tour guide speak of the horror of Auschwitz and the other death camps in which 6 million Jews (one third of all European Jewry), millions of Poles (both Jew and Gentile) as well as countless Slavs, handicapped, resistance fighters and others were disposed with on an industrial scale.

Those words from the Epistle to the Hebrews seem to fly in the face of the awful reality of that awful place. When I came back I picked up a passage I had read some years ago. It is a section in a book by Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, 'Faith in the Future', I have referred to before. The section is entitled 'On God and Auschwitz' that first appeared in the form of a talk on BBC Radio 4.

In this passage he refers to the awful crisis of faith that the Holocaust, the Shoah, represented for the Jewish people. Jewish spirituality was familiar with the concept of God distancing himself from his people in the face of their disobedience – but nothing, not even the destruction of the Temple, came close to these horrendous events. There was that heart-rending question, ‘Where was God at Auschwitz?’ The idea of him there seemed a blasphemy – but the idea that he wasn’t even more so. No sin, real or imagined, could explain the suffering of men, women and children in that place. The idea of him not being there when, out of the valley of the shadow of death his people cried to him in their distress, seemed unbelievable.

Such was the scale of those events, that for twenty years after the Shoah, a theological silence seemed to fall on Judaism – the questions too painful to ask, let alone try to answer. Among contemporary Jewish thinkers the idea arose that the Holocaust, the Shoah was not to be understood, but rather responded to. Coming out of a time when it was a crime in the face of some to be a Jew, one response has been a determination to survive, never again to be vulnerable, to be dependant on others for security. A response that has issued in the State of Israel’s setting of its own security over and above all other issues of human rights and justice in their dealings with the Palestinians – the oppressed becoming the oppressor. It does not justify matters but it does provide a context.

There was another group who lived through the nightmare of the camps, living each day, patiently confronting the never-before-imagined questions and finding answers that enabled them to live their faith in the face of evil; discovering that in the face of evil the Word of God was not silent. Rather it had, remarked Sacks, an awe-inspiring resonance.

But where do I find that resonance, that connection between what I see around me and those words we read today:

‘God has said,
 “Never will I leave you;
 never will I forsake you.”’

So we say with confidence,
“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?””

As I wandered round Auschwitz with those words in my mind, I was confronted with two realities. First there is a dark side to human nature. Secondly the reality, the responsibility of moral choice. Man is created free; free to go with God, free to go against God. Take away that freedom and moral choice is an illusion. But with moral choice comes awful possibilities when the darker side of human nature comes to the fore – be it in Auschwitz, Rwanda or a group of teenagers stoning a pensioner.

I come to see God, not as one who insulates us from all pain but as one who is with his people in the midst of their trouble, their anguish and their suffering. God did not die at Auschwitz, Sacks would argue; He wept tears for his people as they blessed his name at the gates of death. This I think is why I found the cross so powerful. In that anguished cry of despair, ‘My God, my God. Why have you abandoned me?’ I find in Christ a God who has entered into human suffering, who understands the loneliness and despair and emerged triumphant – and is present with us now through his Spirit.

The images of Auschwitz will remain with me probably as long as those of my son and my daughter in law standing before me in St Martin’s in Krakow as I declared them to be husband and wife. I realise, as I reflect on those two images that the God who shared in my joy last weekend is the same God who remains with me and sustains me in the ups and downs of this mortal life. So I think I can begin to understand what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was getting at as he wrote:

‘God has said,
“Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you.”
So we say with confidence,
“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?””