**Holocaust Memorial Day 2019**

*Sermon – Exeter Cathedral*

Luke 4: 14-21

74 years ago Soviet troops liberated the concentration camps at Auschwitz.

Today on the 27th January, on the anniversary of that liberation, we mark Holocaust Memorial Day. We do so to remember the 6 million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. We also remember the millions of others murdered by the Nazis and all those who have been killed in subsequent genocides since the Holocaust: in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and in Darfur.

Across the United Kingdom, there are around 12,000 commemorations of Holocaust Memorial Day taking place—in Parliament and in government departments; in schools and in community groups.

But you and I—gathered in this ancient house of Christian prayer and worship—mark Holocaust Memorial Day too. Why?

Faced with the legacy of history, we are called here today to remember, to reflect, and to recommit ourselves to a world which has learned from the mistakes of the past. But how?

The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day this year is *Torn from Home*. Torn from home.

During the Holocaust millions were torn from their homes and today we commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day in a contemporary world which is itself in many ways ‘torn’: torn over politics, physically torn by climate change, torn between the comfort and security we had grown accustomed to and the unknown challenges that lie ahead.

In our reading this morning from Luke’s account of the Gospel—after 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and tempted by the Devil, confronted with hardship, trauma, and evil—Jesus returns home to Nazareth. In doing so, Jesus teaches us, I think, two things about how we should remember the past and honour our responsibilities in the here and now.

Firstly, Jesus cherishes human story and secondly, Jesus urges people to change the world: to cherish human story and to change the world.

When Jesus returned home to Nazareth, he returned not to private solitude but to the very centre of his community, to the synagogue, the place of congregation, where old and young congregated for teaching and discussion.

Centuries of Christian thought has used this passage to suggest that Jesus was somehow ‘rejected’ by his own community. But we would be wise to avoid such a reading which has contributed to Christian persecution of Jews through millennia.

Jesus did not go to Nazareth to force a break between Judaism and himself. He simply unrolled the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. He read from God’s Holy Scriptures, from the teachings which had sustained the people of God for generations. He recounted the past, rooted in the truth of God’s scripture and the tales of his people.

For us, faced with the terrible legacy of history and the challenging reality of the present, when we congregate however and wherever we do so, we must begin with human story.

On Wednesday this week I was in Manchester for a special Holocaust Memorial Day event organised jointly by the Council of Christians and Jews and the Fed, the social care charity for the Jewish community of Manchester. The Fed conduct a wonderful project called *My Voice,* which, as part of the social care they provide, enables Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees to tell their stories. In providing a space for human story can be told, recounted through a survivor’s own words, the project enables these truths—these lived realities—to be shared and preserved for future generations.

We heard from two survivors during the event and we also heard from two teenagers, who read the words of their great-grandmother, who survived the Holocaust but who has since sadly passed away. It was only at the end that the two children revealed that they were exactly the same age as their great-grandmother and her brother were when they came to this country on the Kindertransport.

Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize-winner, once said: ‘To listen to a witness is to become a witness’. The Holocaust happened. It was experienced by people who live amongst us in our communities. We as the people in congregation have a duty to cherish human story, to remember the truth, and to retell it.

In doing so, we can change the world. Jesus read from the prophecy of Isaiah, an account of human story, of encounter and exile, of crisis and responsibility, stories which were read to the people for generations for a purpose.

We have often read this moment in Luke’s account of the Gospel as fulfilment of prophecy in the sense of Jesus claiming his identity as Messiah. But Jesus reads from Isaiah chapter 61 and it is interesting to read the whole of that chapter, because Isaiah’s prophecy does not simply call for an individual saviour to resolve the world’s challenges. Isaiah also calls on Zion, on the people of God, to act with integrity in the here and now, not to wait for salvation but to enable it for ourselves.

‘They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities.’

The prophecy is fulfilled through us: we have a responsibility, with Christ as our guide, to rebuild the ruined cities:

To change the world.

74 years ago my friend Eva awoke at Auschwitz Birkenau. The Nazi guards had abandoned the concentration camp, forcing most on a death march and burning the gas chambers. Eva was 15 years old. These are her own words, remembering that day:

‘When dawn broke […] we were already deep in discussion about what to do and where to go. The conversation went round and round for what felt like hours. Suddenly, the door to the barrack flung open and a woman shouted, ‘There’s a bear at the gate—a bear!’ This seemed unlikely, but in Birkenau anything was possible. Nervously we made our way down to the entrance and peered at the peculiar sight. Indeed, there was a ‘bear’. A large man covered in bearskins, staring back at us with the same startled expression. Perhaps I should have been more cautious, but all I felt at that moment was unrestrained joy. I ran into his arms, and hugged him. It was 27 January 1945, and Soviet forces had arrived to liberate us’.

Eva added: ‘although our languages were not the same, what I said to him and what he said to me was understood by us both’.

I believe that hug changed the world. Eva has gone on to retell her story. She has done so by speaking to literally tens of thousands of young people across the world. At the age of 89 she continues to do so: to tell the truth of her story and in doing so to encourage subsequent generations to act with love and kindness towards one another.

We cannot measure the impact that Eva has had on the thousands who have heard her but every one of those young people can cherish Eva’s story and learn from that hug.

We too have a responsibility to change the world.

We have not experienced what Eva experienced. But as Christians we are still witnesses: we are witnesses to the evil that humankind is capable of through what we have heard and what we have read and we are witnesses to the love of God which we can express towards God’s people: everyone, whom God teaches us are made in His image.

Jesus calls us to build the Kingdom of God: ‘*on earth* as it is in heaven’.

The Kingdom is built not through grand gestures or change on a large scale. The Kingdom of God is every positive encounter between strangers; each small act of kindness; a hug or a smile, a kind word or a listening ear, or the choice to cross the road to the one who lies in need of our help.

And at root the Kingdom is a home. A home not torn apart by humankind’s folly or evil, but a home of renewal and care and love for everyone. A home where all can have life and life in all its fullness.

We are, therefore, faced with two responsibilities. To cherish human story—with all it tells of the truth of humanity and the truth of God—to remember and to retell to all and in doing so change the world:

‘To bring good news to the poor;
To proclaim release to the captives;
and recovery of sight to the blind;
to let the oppressed go free;
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

There can be no greater calling and if we make it our own to bear then Scripture is indeed fulfilled in our hearing and the Good News can, not just be shared, but be lived in a world which has listened, remembered, changed, and loved.

So thanks be to God.

Amen.