

## 5. Discord, hatred, violence and genocide in the world.

In the last session I described the impact that the empty tomb had made on us, reinforcing our faith in the life to come. Reassuring, comforting, awe-inspiring and wonderful as this is, in fact, we know almost nothing of what to expect and cannot really comprehend eternal life. As Paul put it: ‘for now we see through a glass, darkly’ (1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV).

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Our pilgrimage included a visit to Bethlehem (10 km south of Jerusalem), for which we needed to cross into the occupied territory of the West Bank. The dividing wall erected by the Israeli authorities was a stark reminder of the political realities of Israel today.



This is the view of the dividing wall, surely implying oppression, with graffiti by the activist and artist, Banksy, only a few metres in front of a previously thriving hotel, now dubbed the ‘walled off Astoria,’ (an ingenious play on words contrasting the luxurious Waldorf Astoria hotel in Jerusalem).

## **Jesus's teaching about love for others**

The obvious separation from Israel created by the wall, and the distrust, anger and resentment it generates to this day, seem to replicate feelings that must have been common in Jesus's time. Jesus also lived in disturbing times. His message for this life was distinctly political - surely the reason for his admonishment to his disciples about telling anyone he was the Christ (Messiah) as it would have been seen in political terms inviting the fate that befell John the Baptist<sup>1</sup> – (Matthew 16:20).

Jesus's message was not the anticipated statement of the expected Messiah who was to deliver Israel from the Roman oppressors. Loving enemies and doing good to those who hated you was certainly not the message many would have expected (Matthew 5:44). It would appear that Jesus's teaching was not taken seriously then and the fate that was to befall Israel was the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. But as we are living in similarly disturbing times, surely we should understand and act on Jesus's message as he intended.

So now we turn to the world we live in, the world we can influence, and have influenced, throughout history. Jesus surely did not want us to live in a complacent bubble dreaming of a wonderful world to come – he was teaching about how to live this life. But his teaching about this life, the world we have often abused, our fellow human beings whom we have often ignored, disliked, hated or oppressed is rarely taken seriously in our time.

## **An example from South Africa**

My personal experience that exemplifies the problem of taking Jesus's teaching seriously is from the later years of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

From 1948 a policy of separation of races, apartheid, was adopted by the incoming Nationalist Government. Gradually, and relentlessly, the policy was enforced with increasing oppression of the African races, until ultimately only some 13% of the land area was allocated Black Homelands – the Transkei being the largest of these. Adult males usually needed to find work outside in 'white' South Africa, and could be away for much of the year working in the mines. The effect on home-life, family health and prosperity was disastrous. Protests were put down violently – one of the worst events was the Sharpeville massacre:

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, *Matthew*, 427

## Political Background in the 1960's

Exemplified by  
Sharpeville  
Massacre on  
21<sup>st</sup> March 1960

67 Africans killed  
186 Wounded  
World-wide  
condemnation



A slide I used in a lecture many years after Sharpeville

I remember visiting family relatives in the Eastern Cape in 1971. I encountered roadblocks, burning tyres, armed police and soldiers with armoured vehicles along the route. Political rhetoric on both sides (black and white) was full of anger, hatred and fear. A disturbing issue was the support given to the white regime and its apartheid policies by the Dutch Reformed Church. Civil war seemed imminent.

It was largely due to the statesmanship of Nelson Mandela (who has little reason to assist the white regime), and President F.W.de Klerk (who was labelled a traitor) who worked together towards a settlement that displeased many whites and culminated in the Mandela Presidency.

But then Archbishop Tutu stepped into his exemplary role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a court established in 1996 after the end of apartheid to bring healing between black and white. As a result of the actions of a few, displaying the sort of response Jesus had advocated, civil war was averted and relations between black and white were remarkably transformed.



## An example from Jewish History

Our pilgrimage also included a visit to Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the Jews victims of the Holocaust.



One of many harrowing exhibits is this sculpture by Boris Saksier of Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit), a Polish-Jewish paediatrician and director of an orphanage in Warsaw who refused offers of safety to stay with his orphans when they were sent to Treblinka extermination camp during the Warsaw campaign of 1942.



Some six million Jewish people living in Europe were killed by the Nazi regime. One of the disturbing features is that the perpetrators and their assistants were not of some alien, uncivilised race, but from Europe – home to so much culture and advances associated with civilised society.

Without getting too deeply involved in theodicy it is obvious that Jesus experienced the problems of evil in the world. His life was affected from soon after birth by Herod's killing of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity aged two and under after being outwitted by the Magi (Matthew 2:16), and we know from Josephus of the crucifixion of thousands who defied Rome. The holocaust was only the more recent of the slaughters of innocent Jews over the course of subsequent history. The dividing wall in Israel reminds us of the continuing conflict within the Holy Land.

### Anti-Semitism



This was a mural by an American artist, Mear One, painted on a wall in East London in 2012 that showed the 'banker group made up of Jewish and white Anglos, Rothschilds, Rockefellers' playing monopoly on the backs of naked figures, about class and privilege. Jeremy Corbyn was criticised for defending the mural on grounds of freedom of expression. It was certainly anti-Semitic for the Jewish people. It is one of many reminders that anti-Semitism is still present in some areas of British life.

The issue of antisemitism has reared its head throughout the history of Christianity, culminating in the appalling evil of the holocaust. Christian teaching about Jesus's trial that blames all Jews for having Jesus put to death is clearly wrong if we believe his death was necessary for our salvation and it has perpetuated hatred towards God's chosen people to this day.

The Jews are not the only race to be victims of human-inflicted evil. In Radio 4's Thought for Today of 4<sup>th</sup> November Bishop Richard Harries referred to the long history of suffering of the Russian people, the estimated 20 million Russians who died under Stalin and the estimated 27 million Russians who died in the Second World War. He reminded us of the present conflict in Ukraine and quoted from Mary's song in response to her relative, Elizabeth, who had conceived John the Baptist in her old age: 'He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exulted the lowly' (Luke 1:51-2 NKJV).

### **The Magnificat**

Bishop Harries's reference to Mary's song (known as the Magnificat) may seem an inadequate response to the suffering he referred to. But Edwards, in contrast to modern scholarship, states that 'anyone familiar with twentieth century literature of oppression – Holocaust literature, anti-slave and civil rights literature in America, or literature of apartheid from South Africa, will not find it difficult to imagine that a marginalised young peasant woman steeped in the psalms of Israel could have composed what we know as the Magnificat.'<sup>2</sup> Irrespective of authorship, however, the Magnificat acknowledges Jesus as the start on an answer to the problems of this world. Simeon's words on seeing the baby Jesus likewise gives support for Jesus being the answer to the problems that are so serious that humankind is in need of salvation (Luke 2:29-32). So perhaps we should look again at what Jesus was teaching.

### **Jesus's teaching revisited**

Jesus's teaching about the commandments prioritised love for God, and secondly, love for our neighbour (Matthew 22:36-40). When asked who one's neighbour is, Jesus replied with the teaching of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Edwards states baldly that to Jews 'Samaritans were not simply outcasts, they were enemies.'<sup>3</sup> (The allegorical interpretations of Origen and others are now rejected – Jesus was indeed making a provocative, political statement).

Most people seem to treat their own well (Matthew 5:46), but few have the courage to speak up for the poor, the neglected or the oppressed. Archbishop Tutu in South Africa did just that in the face of the apartheid regime. But he drew on the African concept of Ubuntu, the idea of humanity toward others, that humanity is held together by a universal bond of cooperation, harmony and

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<sup>2</sup> Edwards. *Luke*, 54

<sup>3</sup> Edwards. *Luke*, 322

sharing, recognising the humanity of others. This idea coheres well with Jesus's teaching of love for neighbour.

### **The implications of Jesus's teaching for a troubled world**

In all the examples of cruelty, oppression, hatred and war, mentioned above the furthest thing in the mind of perpetrators was love for neighbour as taught by Jesus. So Bishop Harries's thought for today was not far wide of the mark. Humanity is much to blame for many of the ills of the present world.

### **What can we do as apparently powerless individuals?**

Most of the world's tyrants have acted with support from their own communities – the crowds of adulatory Nazi supporters of Hitler, the similar support for Putin today, attest to this. But what if there were too few supporters, if most individuals were filled with a desire for the good of others? It then becomes difficult to see how the wars of the past and present could have occurred, how the Holocaust could have occurred, how anti-Semitism could have continued, how starving victims of climate change could be ignored!

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But for the next presentation, we will look at the other major problem in our current world – climate change - and apply a theological approach where human efforts look increasingly inadequate (as evidenced in the recent COP27 meeting in Sharm el-Sheik).