



## **The Dean's Address at the Service of Commemoration, Remembrance and Hope**

with the theme 'Ordinary People'

**Holocaust Memorial Day**  
26 January 2023

Holocaust Memorial Day: Hearts that Beat across the World

Someone once said of the French and Jewish philosopher Simone Weil that she had a heart that beats across the world. A heart that beats across the world! What a powerful image for this service of commemoration tonight.

Simone Weil, who was born in 1909 and who died an early death in 1943, had a heart that engaged with the sufferings of this world. She shed tears on hearing of a famine in China. She worked in a car factory in solidarity with those on the production line despite her unsuitability for manual work. She volunteered on the republican side of the Spanish civil war fighting against fascism. And she worked for the free French on the post-Nazi plan in London. She lived out her commitment to identify with the poor by restricting her diet to meagre rations despite her privileged upbringing in Paris.

All this and more showed a heart that beat across the thresholds of nations and crossed established boundaries between peoples and groups. Simone Weil's heart beat in empathy especially with those whom she judged to be oppressed.

So on this Holocaust Memorial Day when our theme is ordinary people, what does it mean for us to have hearts that beat across the world? How can faith's grasp of the role of the heart in our daily lives help us in our remembrance?

In the Judeo-Christian tradition the heart speaks of many things. The heart communicates that as human beings we are many layered, and complex. Heart suggests that within each of us there is a core, a centre that influences the world around us. The heart can help us grasp the theme of this Holocaust Memorial Day – our humanity as ordinary people, capable of extraordinary things yet able to destroy lives and commit unspeakable crimes.

The heart speaks of deep feeling, especially feelings of grief and anger. As we look back over the history of genocide since the beginning of the 20th century we can feel nothing but deep grief and sorrow for the victims, ordinary people, living ordinary lives, and anger at the perpetrators. But then there are the feelings of anxiety and fear in our hearts and we can only imagine such feelings in parts of the world where there is fear of another genocide, or where there is continuing war or oppression. A heart that beats across the world is one that feels that fear as if we were there. It's a heart that grieves. Our emotions are heart-felt. Our hearts-ache.

But the heart speaks also of courage, bravery, fortitude. A heart that beats across the world overcomes complacency to stand up for what is true and good and just. In a global age we are encouraged to think globally but act locally. In an information world every local resistance to what is evil has the potential to resound across the world. Think global, act local motivates and urges us to consider the well-being of all human beings across the planet and live out our lives with courage in the communities in which we are rooted.

Nicholas Winton, born in the same year as Simone Weil was a young stockbroker at the time he helped to rescue 669 children from the threat of almost certain death in Czechoslovakia. In 1938 he was about to

leave for a skiing holiday in Switzerland when friends called him to visit Prague to help with Jewish refugee work. He was there just one month and when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia six weeks later he was in England using his influence to get the children through Europe safely by train whilst his colleagues worked hard in Prague against the odds. Not all the Kindertransport, as it's called, was successful but Nicholas Winton found homes for the children he saved. Nicholas Winton was knighted in 2003 for 'services to humanity' and was named as Righteous Among the Nations at the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

He said afterwards, 'why are you making such a big deal of it? I just helped a little: I was in the right place at the right time'. There he was, developing strategic actions in his own place and his story is now told globally. His is a heart that beats across the generations calling us all to action. He could see the bigger picture and knew that his humanity demanded a response that shared in the risk and courage that made the trains happen. Kindertransport: ordinary people who achieved extraordinary things.

So if our hearts hold our emotions and enable us to have courage then faith communities also know the difficult truth that hearts can be hardened creating indifference towards evil. Indifference leads to inertia; it's turning away from ethical actions for the common good. In our ordinariness the temptation can be to let evil happen by doing nothing to resist it. Ordinary people, as well as doing great things, can be caught up in evil.

This is the 'banality of evil' that another female philosopher, Hannah Arendt identified in her reflections on the Holocaust. She sat through the trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1961. Eichmann had been a senior Nazi tasked with the transport of millions of Jews and others to concentration camps. He had supported the Nazi's final solution.

What struck Hannah Arendt as she watched the trial was Eichmann's ordinariness. She observed in Eichmann no great monster. Evil acts are so often committed by ordinary people obeying orders. It's possible to perform actions that have evil consequences without having evil intentions. Ordinary people involved in obeying orders, evil deeds without evil intentions. In Arendt's view this was someone without reflection whose inner life was disconnected from the reality of the world.

Faith advocates a radically different perspective. Faith says that in our hearts is that space for reflection, that room within us to ponder, make sense of our world and discern what is the good thing to do. Faith says that if the human heart is the place where we can turn in on ourselves, become self-centred and deliberately or inadvertently develop thoughts and actions that lessen the value of the other person, then how much more is it also the place where we can source energy for growth, renewal and change both locally and globally?

The Christian faith brings us the insight that only the God who shares in the sufferings of world can offer us hope. Only God can extend the horizon of the human heart and release us from our inertia, and from the service of our own desires, or the evil desires that lie behind genocide.

God's heart beats across the world as God feels the pain of the creation and of human beings' inhumanity to each other. In the Christian faith it's the death of God's son Jesus that makes the difference – the one who courageously does not return the wickedness of the world but instead endures and absorbs the pain, the prejudice and the hatred.

This is God's love 'bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things and enduring all things', as Fr David read to us from the work of the apostle Paul. It's the triumph of love over the evil of this world and in Jesus Christians believe that we can see the transformation of hatred, wickedness and even banality into mercy, peace and justice. It's the power of God's love that gives us hope today in the face of the world's evil, in the midst of our grief at genocide, in the midst of our emotions, in the midst of our reflections.

It's love that triumphs over death and destruction and brings new life into the world and which shapes our hearts in a new and positive way. It's love that inspires a renewed practice that overcomes evil through actions which bring hope to individuals and groups in our sphere of influence and knowingly contributes to the wider vision that we have for the coming of God's kingdom.

And that vision is a world across which all our hearts beat resonating with the heartbeat of the oppressed and persecuted. A vision of love that draws human beings together. A love that deeply challenges the desire for evil in the human heart.

And if our hearts are the source of our will and purpose, then we pray earnestly for human hearts to be transformed by God's love and redirected to a will and purpose that settles for nothing less than a world without genocide, without war and bloodshed, a world filled with love and a deep respect for each other in our differences. If our hearts together can beat across the world with all who suffer then we must imagine nothing less.

In a moment of silence let us pray.

**The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson  
Dean of Derby Cathedral**