

Last Monday marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camp at Auschwitz Birkenau in Poland by the Soviet Army in 1945. To this day, the word ‘Auschwitz’ summons up images of a brutal human depravity that is even now hard to comprehend.

Twelve years ago, when we were in Krakow for our son Anthony’s wedding, we went to visit this place. Even though the gas chambers and crematoria have been largely destroyed, and all that remains of many of the barracks of the Birkenau section of the camp is rows of concrete foundations, there is still an eerie atmosphere to the complex. There are still the railway lines passing through the entrance arch. You still see the sign proclaiming the grotesque lie, ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’, work makes you free. You see the evidence in display cabinets of a grim efficiency in what was designed as an industrial process; the detailed records of names, photographs of inmates, recording dates of arrival and extermination; the evidence of recycling of the possessions, shoes, clothes, hair and even artificial limbs of those who were transported to this place, simply because they were different, different race, different religion. It is true, you do not hear a sound of a bird to break the eerie silence of this place.

As we prepared to go in, our guide made an observation that I have never forgotten. ‘What happened here was not done by monsters. It was done by human beings to other human beings.’

This Sunday is observed as the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Our Gospel reading rounds off the New Testament accounts of the infancy of Jesus. He was born a child as we were, he lived in a human family

who celebrated the birth of their first born son according the traditions of their ancestors. In the words of our lesson from the Letter to the Hebrews we are reminded

‘He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect’.  
*Heb 2:17*

This is a theme that is picked up by a number of early Christian writers, as they declare ‘He became like us so that we might become more like him.

Jesus is the one through whom and in whom we see humanity as God intended. In his teaching, in his death and resurrection we discover our own humanity as God intends it to be. In him we see God’s welcome to us in all our imperfection.

In the words of our Eucharistic Prayer

In Christ you shared our life  
that we might live in him and he in us.

**He opened wide his arms upon the cross  
and, with love stronger than death,  
he made the perfect sacrifice for sin.**

As he took the child Jesus in his arms, when his parents brought him to the Temple, Simeon declared:

<sup>29</sup>‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
<sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
<sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
<sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.’ *Luke 2:29ff*

My eyes have seen your salvation, a light for revelation, a glory.

Auschwitz and the Presentation – two pictures of humanity. Humanity as God intended and humanity as it can be when it loses sight of all morality. I return to the words of the guide who took us around Auschwitz

‘What happened here was not done by monsters. It was done by human beings to other human beings.’

The first step in any process of such as that of Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’ is to undermine that fundamental truth in the minds of camp guards, administrators, to portray the victims as different, not human in the way that they are human. It is this that lies at the heart of racism, sectarianism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia. When we go down that path, we lose sight not only of the humanity of the other, we lose light of our own humanity.

This has implications not just for us as individuals but for us as a society. One of the features of the electoral process in different parts of the world has been the rise of an insidious form of populism. This purports to suggest that the problems of a society are caused by those who are different; the migrant, the Muslim, the traveller, the Jew. It has been worrying to see the rise of far right and fundamentalist groups, making gains on the strength of the fears they instil in the wider population.

We saw something of this in the last Presidential campaign here in Ireland. Since then we have seen individual politicians, latching on to genuine concerns about the Direct Provision process, seeking to capitalise on peoples concern with statements that have been blatantly racist. The current General Election campaign here in Ireland, apart from early comments by one individual on the Irishness and sexuality of the Taoiseach, has been relatively free of such

influences. But we must never be complacent. We have seen what Nazism did to Germany, apartheid to South Africa, sectarianism to Northern Ireland. We must view with concern the latest developments in Israel Palestine. Societies that are built on undermining the worth of whole sections of the population are themselves impoverished.

This near juxtaposition of the Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz, with its chilling images of the depths of inhumanity, and this Feast of the Presentation of Christ – God becoming like us so that we might become more like him; all this draws attention to that contrast between what man is called to be and the depths to which evil can drag him.

The Gospel, with its message of humanity as seen in the person of Jesus, of righteousness, of witness to truth, to reconciliation can be a message of healing in this broken and hurting world.

As he prepared to stand down as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, the late Captain Terence O'Neill lamented; 'Our religion could have enhanced our politics. Instead we have allowed our politics to demean our religion.'