solidarity of the shaken

Some of you know that I am involved with a secondary school in North London. We have 1700 students, an early years centre and a newly opened unit for students who are on the autistic spectrum. One of the most memorable things that happens within the school year every year is that someone comes to talk to the students and staff who survived the Holocaust. It will happen again this week and is something that stands out as a horrifying yet necessary day in the education of this generation of British schoolchildren. Auschwitz was liberated 69 years ago tomorrow, and so it is not for many more years that this direct link will be possible. Today’s teenagers listen to the testimony of those now in their 80s, and are often left weeping and appalled that they are meeting a person who has experienced hell. Only 69 years later the full meaning of what happened has probably not been expressed and the attempted extermination of Jews, of Romany people, of homosexuals, of anyone the Nazi regime described as degenerate: this industrialised killing continues to toxify European memory and continues too, to pervert contemporary national and religious interaction.

The 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War coming up in August this year sees the commemoration of the first steps that led to the election of the National Socialist Party in Germany in 1933, whose leader Adolf Hitler fought in the 1914 war, and as no doubt we shall hear many times over this year, the Second War is seen by many historians as really a continuation of the First.

Today’s not a day for political comment: it is a day for remembrance and commemoration: but there are important philosophical and spiritual themes that emerge from our marking of Holocaust Memorial Day as a Christian church, not least a determination to remember and pledge to learn everything we can from the testimony of those who were there.

In previous sermons, I’ve used the work of two Jewish 20th century women philosophers Simone Weil and the other Hannah Arendt. Today I want to listen to the reflections of a third: Gillian Rose, who wrote much about the Holocaust as a British Jew, and the depth of whose reflections and insights have made her one of the most respected philosophical voices of the last century. She died in 1995, too soon from cancer, but her work is considered amongst the very best of her or any generation.

She herself was appointed by the Polish government in 1990 as part of a committee looking at how Auschwitz should be preserved and presented, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to reinterpret it for visitors after the end of the Communist regime.

Gillian Rose reflected and wrote much about how to remember such a cataclysm. and she did not spare her readers. She was critical for example of films such as Schindler’s List which, she asserted, put the viewer in the role of rather innocent bystander or remote judge. She challenged her readers to resist the easy characterization of ourselves as somehow neutral observers of a horrible historical evil. This is, she argued, to rescue ourselves, to excuse ourselves from what has to be in the end a deeper acceptance of our own complicity. She wrote this for example about the process of observation and involvement;

In a nature film, we could be made to identify with the life cycle of the fly as prey of the spider, and we could be made to identify with the life cycle of the spider as prey of the rodent. We can be made to identify with the Peking Opera singer who is destroyed by the Cultural Revolution and we can equally be made to identify with the rickshaw man, for whom the Cultural Revolution was the “beginning of paradise”. It is only the ultimate predator whose sympathies can be so promiscuously enlisted.
Here she is making a very profound statement about human nature. That human beings have the capacity to be the so-called ultimate predator—able to be drawn in to identify with every predator, every victim depending on the level of what she identified as propaganda, the persuasive power of art. She makes a distinction between sentimental predators—that we can rather cozily identify with—and the real capacity we have as ultimate predators for collusion, deception, complicity.

Gillian Rose commends the memoir of a Polish inmate of Auschwitz. He writes from a clear ethical presupposition—that Auschwitz is an expression of evil—but he somehow represents himself both as executioner and victim. He makes you witness brutality in the most disturbing way, for it is not clear... from what position, as whom, you are reading. You emerge shaking in horror at yourself with yourself in question, not in admiration for the author’s Olympian serenity. This is bearing witness to “a level of truth—about hell—beyond all art” Shanks Against Innocence p 25

What Gillian Rose says to 20th century Europeans is bracing. She argues that it is easy to develop a solidarity between those who think that deep down they are innocent of the world’s wrongs. She argues not for a solidarity of the falsely innocent but what might be called the solidarity of the shaken. (Andrew Shanks p28) - a solidarity that comes from being made acutely aware of the suffering in the world, but also in terms of our own personal complicity in it.

She is trying to find a way of building solidarity and community that is free from propaganda. Only way to avoid propaganda, she suggests, is honest prayer in which we are confronted with another reality, a depth before which we are contemplative—a depth of reality that remains, despite our attempts to domesticate it, strange to us. It is only this kind of religion that can ultimately dissolve the towering totalitarian certainties of fascism.

Our faith is partly there to “shake us out of our delusions of uninvolved innocence”

Arguably, it’s also why faith must always be politically engaged—not in the sense of telling people how to vote—but politically active in philosophical debate, in developing a vision of a good society.

In this church last Friday Rowan Williams spoke to an audience the largest component of which were teenage British Muslims. He was talking about spirituality and one particular reflection was striking in its simplicity and relevance to this consideration of Gillian Rose’s.

One of the strands of his reflection was that we have de-valued spirituality to be something that we want to give us warm feelings about who we are and about the world in general. When these warm feelings are not present or achievable, we feel desolate and undermined. What he wanted to offer instead is the reflection that spirituality is more straightforward and less subjective than this: the movement of the Spirit is that which clarifies—and connects. When, as a result of spiritual contemplation, we see reality clearly, we identify injustice or suffering or joy or community: we become newly connected to one another, to ourselves, to God. If the movement of the Spirit clarifies, uncovers the truth—and also leads to new connections, then far from spirituality being something that is primarily concerned with warm feelings, it is first and foremost thoroughly realistic. Grounded, earthed, concerned with now, today, here, me and you. Awakening to our own spiritual selves—and taking our own spirituality seriously, leads us to recognise the fantasies we carry around about ourselves and cultivates in us the courage continuously to reject them.

Because it is precisely those fantasies and myths that are dangerous, even lethal sometimes to ourselves and sometimes to others. The fantasy on a personal level that we are not worth as much as other people; the fantasy on a collective level that we are basically right and everyone else is probably wrong. Fantasies such as these spawn appalling totalizing philosophies that underpinned for example the slaughter of estimated hundreds of thousands of women over three hundred years in Europe (1450-1750) executed as witches. Fantasies about light skinned people having power over dark skinned people spawned the totalizing philosophy that underpinned the slaughter and sale of human beings in the slave trade.
To face these European totalizing philosophies and the tendencies in ourselves to be aggressively protective of our own fantasies is to begin to develop a realistic spirituality. It is to resist the tendency to want to form a solidarity of the falsely innocent, whereas in fact what is much more authentic is to form a solidarity of the shaken. Shaken to our core that this Holocaust is part of our cultural, political and yes religious history.

But vitally, we are not paralysed by this realization – nor do we let it lead us to become unhealthily obsessed with sin or guilt. We gather today around this communion table to imagine together a world where all are fed, where justice and mutual liberation are possible for everyone. This sacrament is a sign of a new future, a hopeful and prophetic act that cultivates courage and wisdom, and real community.

And we gather as those who know the solidarity not of some fantasy innocence but the solidarity of the shaken. And we know that we are struck dumb by human capacity for cruelty at precisely the same moment as we are given a voice by the human capacity for resistance to such cruelty.

In recognition that one of the most potent memoirs of the Holocaust is the book “Night” by Elie Wiesel, I end with a prayer poem by the Christian mystic St John of the Cross.

*That eternal spring lies hidden,*  
*How well I know its hiding place*  
*Even when it is night.*

*In the dark night of this life*  
*How well I know in faith the sacred spring,*  
*Even when it is night.*

*I do not know its source, for it has none,*  
*But I know that every source comes from it.*  
*Even when it is night.*

Amen.
Lucy Winkett