

15-minute sermon for Armenian Genocide Commemoration service at Armenian Orthodox Church, London, Sunday 25 April 2021

The Very Rev. Cor Episcopos Professor Patrick Sookhdeo PhD, DD

Bible reading John 14:1-13

It is a great privilege to be invited by His Grace, Bishop Hovakim Manukyan, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of the United Kingdom and Ireland, to preach during this Divine Liturgy in commemoration of the genocide of the Armenian people a century ago. We are surrounded now by a vast and glorious company of martyrs. As we remember those terrible events and the indescribable suffering inflicted on Armenian Christians, as well as on Assyrian, Syriac and Greek Christians, we resolve to do everything possible to ensure that such horrors are never repeated, to work for reconciliation between all people, and to pray constantly for God's mercy and peace.

Mistreatment and periodic pogroms had, for a long time, been the experience of Christian minorities living in the Ottoman Empire, but it was in the twentieth century that the Ottoman authorities determined to eliminate the Armenians altogether. On Saturday 24 April 1915 the orders were issued and immediately implemented that night and on into Sunday 25 April, the terrible Red Sunday. About 250 notable figures of the Armenian community – academics, politicians, clergy, professionals, artists, writers and musicians – were arrested in that first wave, and most of them later tortured and killed.

Then came house-to-house searches. The able-bodied men were taken away for military service, labour camps or death. After that the women, children, elderly and infirm were deported and marched to barren concentration camps in the desert, with little to offer the new arrivals but dysentery. Few, however, got to the end of the journey. Many died along the way from hunger or thirst, or the attacks of Turks, Kurds and other irregular troops. Some were drowned, or drowned themselves and each other to escape what was to come. Corpses (and later skeletons) littered the way, as the "death marches" and massacres continued into 1916.

The Armenian Catholic Archbishop of Mardin, Ignatius Maloyan, was forced to watch as 100 of his priests and faithful, taken from a death march in June 1915, were murdered by Turkish troops in some nearby caves. The archbishop was told that, if he converted to Islam, his life would be spared. He refused and was martyred, declaring first, "It does not please God that I should deny Jesus my Saviour. To shed my blood for my faith is the strongest desire of my heart."

Around 800,000 Armenians died in 1915 alone, and a total of 1.5 million in the Genocide as a whole. From an estimated population of more than two million in 1914, the number of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire had dwindled to 387,800 by 1922 – and most of the survivors then migrated to other countries. Not content with eliminating the presence of Christian people, Turkey has gone on to systematically destroy the rich cultural heritage of churches, monasteries, libraries and art, and denies not only their suffering but their very history.

The deafening silence from the international community at the time is all the more incredible, and all the more shameful, because journalists, diplomats and others were sending reports to the West, even with photographs, to inform them about the atrocities against the Armenians. During the Second World War, no one outside knew about the starving and gassing of Jews and others in

concentration camps; it was all discovered afterwards. But in the First World War, the Western powers were aware that the Armenians were being destroyed; they simply chose not to intervene.

Adolf Hitler asked rhetorically, “Who, after all speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” as he issued commands in 1939 to his generals for the atrocities he wanted to commit. He was right that the Armenian suffering was forgotten, but wrong that his own efforts to eliminate Jews, Poles and others would be a matter of indifference to the international community. Why does no one remember the Armenians?

A German Christian who opposed Hitler and died himself in a concentration camp, Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, struggled to know what a Christian should do who lives in a nation controlled by evil men with almost unlimited power to destroy others. Certainly, he or she must do something, Bonhoeffer concluded:

“If I sit next to a madman as he drives a car into a group of innocent bystander, I can’t as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe, then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.”

In 1896 Sir William Watson, an English poet, published a book of poems¹ on “England’s desertion of Armenia” castigating his country for their inaction during the massacres of Armenians in 1895. In one he writes in a very similar vein to the way Bonhoeffer was to write, decades later:

If, for some cause, ye may not yet make plain,
Yearning to strike, ye stood as one may stand
Who in a nightmare sees a murder planned
And hurrying to its issue, and though fain
To stay the knife, and fearless, must remain
Madly inert, held fast by ghostly band; –
If such your plight, most hapless ye of men!
But if ye could and would not, oh, what plea
Think ye, shall stead you at your trial when
The thunder-cloud of witnesses shall loom,
With Ravished Childhood on the seat of doom,
At the Assizes of Eternity?²

Pope Francis has commented that, in the experience of the Armenians, we confront the *mysterium iniquitatis* – the mystery of evil – the dark forces that can possess the human heart. He has spoken also of the “complicit silence” of modern media, international organisations and powerful governments who stand “mute and inert before such unacceptable crimes” against persecuted Christians today, just as they did before.

¹ William Watson, *The Purple East: A Series of Sonnets on England’s Desertion of Armenia*, London, John Lane, 1896.

² Extract from “If” by William Watson, *The Purple East*, pp.41-42. Italics are in the original.

What does the Lord Jesus say to us, as we grapple with such horrendous memories, such appalling callousness, such extreme injustice? The Bible reading that we have heard this morning begins with Jesus' words: "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

It was a Passover meal, at which Jesus announced to His disciples His coming death. He had told them many times before, without them grasping what He meant, but now He makes it clear that He is about to leave this world and that His disciples cannot follow Him where He was going.

The Greek word for "troubled" is *tarassein*. Its primary meaning is acute distress, that is, sorrow, anxiety, psychological suffering, nervous exhaustion, stress-induced trauma. It also indicates extreme physical pain.

In the New Testament, this strong word for severe suffering, whether mental or physical, occurs only a few times. One example is the deep distress Jesus felt when He saw Mary and others weeping for the death of Lazarus (John 11:33). Another is when He spoke to the disciples of the fact that one of them was going to betray Him (John 13:21). We know that Jesus Himself felt *tarassein* at this time, and no doubt the disciples did too.

So the deep distress of *tarassein* is associated with extreme situations such as betrayal and death. What is the extreme situation that causes Jesus to use this strong word as He tells His beloved followers not to let their hearts be troubled? It is an uncertain future. He has just told them that He was leaving them.

Jesus, who always understands our hearts, realises the shock and deep distress that these words have caused them and urges them, as they face an uncertain future, not to be overwhelmed by distress.

1. The distress of death

Today we remember the past, the martyrdom of a people, the systematic liquidation of a race, a Christian people.

But we also remember the deaths of the present time – those who died in the Artsakh war. While the martyr's death can fill us with joy, thinking of lost loved ones, cruelly slaughtered, can bring deep distress.

2. The distress of betrayal

We do not know what motivated Judas to betray His Master. Was it just for 30 pieces of silver or something more? Many betray for financial gain. Many betray for political gain. Judas betrayed with his words and his kiss, but there is also betrayal by silence, when our friends do not speak up for us. After last year's war, the Primate of Artsakh spoke poignantly of being "forgotten again".

3. The distress of uncertainty

We face today the uncertainty of the many dozens known to be held captive in Azerbaijan whether soldiers or civilians. Have they been tortured? Will they be released? We face uncertainty about the fate of many hundreds who went missing in the war last year, who could be dead or alive but no one knows.

This uncertainty can cause deep mental distress for families – a psychological suffering which can produce self-induced trauma and even extreme physical pain.

We also face uncertainty about the future of Artsakh and even of Armenia itself.

In the face of death, betrayal and uncertainty, Jesus tells us not to let our hearts be troubled with this deep distress. But how can we prevent our hearts from being troubled?

Jesus gives the answer: we must believe and trust in God and in Jesus Himself (verse 2a). We must have faith. The word for “faith” has the meaning of firmness. To have faith is to be strong, sure, and resolute, by participating in God’s own firmness. It means perseverance, persistence, determination and strength.

So, by faith, we must be strong, resolute and persevering.

Jesus told His disciples (verse 2b) that He is going to prepare a place for them, a resting place for someone on a journey. Our final resting place will be Heaven, when we come to the end of our faith journey.

An ancient Armenian writer said that God is our home. We are going home to Him.

The road to Golgotha leads to an empty tomb and a Resurrection and Heaven, where there will be no sorrow or pain or death.

Let me conclude with some words from a prayer by St Grigor Narekatski, who lived more than a thousand years ago:³

may Satan be confounded and his machinations foiled,
may his snares be removed and his forces be defeated,
may his sharp-edged weapons be ineffective,
may his fog be lifted, his darkness dispelled, his shadow withdrawn.
May your arm shield me and your right hand seal me,
For you are compassionate and merciful,
And your servants are called by your name.
To you with the Father and your Holy Spirit,
Glory and power forever and ever.
Amen

³ St Grigor Narekatski, *Speaking with God from the Depths of the Heart: The Armenian Prayer Book of St. Gergory of Narek*, translated by Thomas J. Samuelian, poetic editing by Diana der Hovanessian, 3rd edition, Yerevan, Vem Press, 2005 p.466.