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DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND IRELAND

Armenian Genocide Remembrance Service

Coventry Cathedral

24 April 2021

Bishop Hovakim Manukyan

Remarks

Christ is risen!

Քրիստոս յարեաւ ի մեռելոց!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In this season of Eastertide we celebrate the victory of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, His triumph over death and injustice, and the victory of His love over hatred and violence. Yet, in this poignant season, we have gathered here in this historical cathedral of Coventry to commemorate a genocide. It is the day when 106 years ago in the Ottoman Empire, Armenian intellectuals, priests, writers, scientists and even Members of the Ottoman Parliament were arrested in Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, and sent to their death. It is the day when in April 1915, the leadership of the Armenian nation was annihilated and the state-organised genocide of the Armenians began. The years 1915 to 1921 are among the darkest periods in the millenia-long history of the Armenian nation, marked by the massacres and mass deportations of one and a half million Armenian Christians.

Today we are gathered to commemorate millions of Christian Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians who lost their lives in the Ottoman Empire and were driven out of their ancestral homeland.

Dear brothers and sisters,

There was a beautiful tradition among the early Christians of exchanging testimonies and stories of martyrs. They encouraged each other with hope and with Christ's words: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." (John 14.1).

Similarly, allow me to share with you a story of hope, my personal testimony, the story of Marica, my great-grandmother, who was a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. Growing up, I remember she always wore black, dark colours, and sometimes she would sing sad, emotional songs. But Marica would always bless people who passed by her house or visited her at home, saying with a big smile: “May the Saviour Jesus be with you”. I remember, if someone asked for water, she would rise at once, even in her old age, and bring water to them.

My great-grandmother was born at the beginning of the 20th century in an Armenian village called Beylan, in present-day Turkey, located on the north-eastern shores of the Mediterranean. When World War I started, her family went through the same ordeal as hundreds of thousands of others. They were deported to the Syrian Desert, to Deir ez-Zor by the Ottoman Government. She never spoke about her mother, Rebecca, who was murdered on the road where multitudes were sent to their death.

Marica did speak about her sister Anoush and her little brother Megerdich. Anoush was taken into an American orphanage, but she later disappeared. Marica remembered the last words she spoke to her five year-old sister: “Would you write to me, Anoush?” she asked her anxiously. “Yes, when I learn how to write,” was Anoush’s reply.

Her brother Megerdich was a small boy, barely 2 or 3 years old. The family had made a vow not to cut his hair until he became 7 years old, a Christian practice by pious parents, a tradition practised until today. It is a ritual of thankfulness to God for blessing the family with a boy. As such, Megerdich had long hair and wore a long dress, a sort of gown worn in early childhood.

One tragic day, a few Turkish soldiers had come to the village to take away the beautiful girls for themselves. They thought Megerdich was a girl, but when they raised his gown they discovered he was a boy. They hit him with the butt of a rifle. Megerdich was badly hurt and asked for water. There was water nearby, but it was dirty with ash. My great-grandmother rushed to bring some of that water to Megerdich, but he told her that it was dirty. In desperation, Marica ran to find clean water, but to her horror, when she returned, Megerdich had gone forever.

Ever since, every time my great-grandmother brought water to the thirsty, she was in effect giving water to her brother Megerdich; she re-lived his memory by quenching the thirst of others.

Under conditions of starvation, those who made it to Aleppo, spun wool in exchange for raisins and raisins for bread. This is but a small part of the story. Every time I remember our great-grandparents, it breaks my heart, even 106 years after such a tragedy. Every descendant of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide has a similar story to tell.

In 2020, the Armenian nation experienced another calamity. Armenians in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabagh) were subjected to a genocidal war, carried out with the same indiscriminate brutality and hatred. Thousands of innocent lives were cut short, thousands were displaced. Indeed, the veins of Artsakh today are bleeding just like the rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates at the beginning of the 20th century.

Jesus Christ said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 5:10)

Our story today is a story of pain and suffering, but it is also a story of victory. My great-grandmother, Marica, survived and had children even though she had to leave her place of birth, her homeland and change homes several times in her life. Megerdich and the one and a half million Armenians like him, who lost their lives under the sword of the Ottoman Turks, are our martyrs in heaven. Just as the Armenian nation survived those unspeakable atrocities at the beginning of the 20th century, so will the nation survive today and be resilient.

But now we must ask ourselves: How long should innocent human beings continue to suffer atrocities, war crimes, genocide and murderous regimes? The answer must be not even for one second.

This historical Church, where we have gathered to pray together, bears witness to another human tragedy. Surrounding us lie the ruins of the original cathedral destroyed during World War II. It was the Nazis themselves who, while planning the extermination of the Jewish people, said, "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Failure to condemn the crimes of the past can only lead to new crimes being committed.

Today the Church of England also commemorates St. Mellitus, the Bishop of London, along with the Seven Martyrs of the Melanesian Brotherhood. Melanesian brothers were peacemakers, and members were killed whilst carrying out their mission of peace in 2003. The Middle East is not at peace. There have been a number of cases of mass killings of Christians even in their places of worship. Martyrs have lived at different times and under different historical circumstances but have one thing in common: their witness to Christ and their message to us. Their sacrifice unites us to pray and work for justice and for those who continue to suffer from war crimes, atrocities and armed conflicts.

Dear brothers and sisters,

The recognition and condemnation of the Armenian Genocide -- and all genocides -- is a must to prevent further crimes against humanity. It is not to comfort the victims or to please the survivors, but to do the right thing, to take a moral stand against aggression.

During World War 1, Great Britain, along with her allies, was quick to condemn the atrocities committed against the Armenians and other Christians in the Ottoman Empire as crimes against humanity. Today, more than ever, British people must, once again, show moral fortitude by recognising the genocide of the Armenians. As spiritual leader of the Armenian community in the United Kingdom, and as the shepherd of a community that built its first house of worship in this country one hundred and fifty years ago, I call upon Christian congregations and the British people to set aside an Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day in Britain.

Our common humanity and solidarity can triumph over evil in our world when we come together in Christian faith and defend the oppressed and the needy with a united and determined voice.

Martin Luther King said that when the time comes, “We will not remember our enemies but the silence of our friends.” Today our martyrs are crying, do not be silent.

Dear Bishop Christopher, brothers and sisters in Christ,

Concluding my remarks, I would like to thank you for hosting this prayer service in this beautiful Cathedral. I would like to thank the Dean of the Cathedral, your entire team, Father David and everyone who helped organise this prayer service.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14) Amen!