

Holocaust Memorial Sunday
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St Peter's Church, Harrogate
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Holocaust Memorial Sunday 2021. An important day.

So much has happened since we were together last year to remember the millions of people who have been killed, and whose lives have been affected by the Holocaust and the genocides that followed.

The world is in the grip of a pandemic. We have lost loved ones, are isolating in our homes, cut off from family and friends, in insecure work situations, our lives on hold.

The pandemic may instil in us an even deeper appreciation of the suffering we commemorate today, recognizing the frailty of life but also the dependency on one another, the need to pull together, to do the right thing, to even take grave risks to save others.

Professor Richard Morris, last year on Holocaust memorial Sunday, talked about *The Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt's famous book on the trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann who she describes as a dull bureaucrat. Professor Morris discussed the Milgram experiment, which Milgram, a social psychologist, had set up as a response to the Eichmann trial. Milgram was struck by Eichmann's refusal to take responsibility for his role in the Holocaust, insisting he had only obeyed orders. The experiment – giving electric shocks to a person (who was in on it – an actor) showed that when confronted with an authoritative figure and done in incremental steps, ordinary people are capable of causing serious harm to others. Initially those who were asked to induce the shocks refused but when the man in a white coat insisted, they gave in muttering "it is was on him" eventually not refusing at all.

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I have been fascinated by the question of evil throughout my career; how can ordinary people commit extraordinary crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes? As a legal scholar, working in the area of global justice I have met people who have been accused and convicted of these crimes; people who were on trial for their role in the genocides in Rwanda and in Bosnia.

These people were not monsters, or sadistic figures. Often, they had been remote from the scene of the crimes; they had not participated in the mass killings. They were the ones feeding the hatred, inciting mobs often for opportunist, political reasons. Or they had enabled them, for instance by working as a journalist at a radio station spreading lies and propaganda. You can probably see where I am going with this....

This week we witnessed the inauguration of the 46th President of the US. Just two weeks before the inauguration, the Capitol was stormed by an armed mob mainly from the far right. Confederate flags, a symbol of slavery and discrimination, were carried into the seat of the US Congress and Senate. We saw people wearing T-shirts with fascist messages. It was deeply disturbing and frankly sickening. The mob was fired up by the outgoing President who refused to accept his election defeat. They were fed lies

on social media and news channels who refused to report accurately, enabling outrageous conspiracy theories to spur them on.

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Hannah Arendt's banality of evil-thesis was controversial. She was accused by Jewish people at the time, including her own mentor, of trivializing the evil that was at trial in Eichmann's case. Research by German historian Bettina Stangeth's, decades after Arendt, shows that Eichmann was deeply antisemitic and a genuine Nazi ideologue. Up until his death (he was hanged), he refused to apologize. While she did not directly attack Arendt; her work is taken by some to disqualify the banality of evil-thesis.

I think the critique of Arendt's work is not accurate. By banality she meant the lack of reflection. The evil she writes about is *normalizing the abnormal*. In later work on totalitarianism she describes it as a fungus, spreading in the brain. Banality of evil is the process of shutting down, of not feeling moral outrage. Criminologists who study perpetrators of mass atrocities confirm this process of a gradual silencing of moral unease, eventually allowing extremist views to take hold. This is easier when you are not confronted with the actual bloodshed, when you work at a desk or in a newsroom far from where policies are executed.

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Last year for Holocaust Remembrance Day BBC Radio 3 did a documentary on Elisabeth Charlotte Gloeden, known as Lilo, who along with her husband Erich hid Jews in their home in Berlin before arranging safe passage for them out of Germany. She was part of a small group of Germans who opposed the hatred that had taken hold of her country. Such bravery in the heart of Nazi Germany is inspiring. Lilo was betrayed, convicted and sentenced to death 6 months before the end of the war, together with her husband and mother. In her letter pleading for a pardon her mother wrote: "we just did what we thought was good and right in our daily lives".

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One of the problems with Donald Trump's political reign was his tactics of deepening divisions, of entrenching biases. He criticised 'the other', through culture wars and stereotyping whilst making those on his side feel victimized and wronged so they can blame 'the other'. It is a scenario from a dictator's playbook. It is what happened in Nazi Germany, Rwanda, and Bosnia.

The message I wish to convey today is this: We need to reflect and call out evil when we see it; do good in our daily lives. Bearing in mind what we witnessed 2 weeks ago: we need to do more: *we need to prevent division*. How? Let's start by confronting our own – sometimes unconscious – biases. By treating one another with respect and dignity. By really listening. By seeing what we have in common rather than what divides us.

In God's eyes we are all the same. We are all fallible, frail and imperfect. But we are also capable of bravery of caring for others of helping others. Inspired by God's message of love we can all contribute to ensuring that what we remember today will not happen again.

Let me close by reading Proverbs 24:24-25

Whoever says to the wicked, "You are in the right," will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations, but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them.