



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I Tim. 1:2

When asked what news actually was, David Brinkley once answered rather ostentatiously, "The news is what I say it is." Even though media outlets have proliferated in recent years, in essence the news is still what the media giants say it is. That means, of course, that the most important news of the past weeks involved American Idol, Katie Couric, and the Da Vinci Code flick. Or, taking a more jaundiced view, the most important news involves the coupling and uncoupling of some of Hollywood's celebrities.

But under the radar are events of far more historical and cultural import, especially to those who claim to be people of faith. One of those which caught the eye first was my wife Jackie, and then my own attention, was the visit of Pope Benedict to Poland, leading to a pilgrimage to the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. It took some digging to learn about the actual events and the meaning of these events, but once again the internet offers us untold resources in this regard.

Those who accompanied the Pope described stunning images. Commentator Roger Boyes writes, "The 79-year-old Pope, drawn and grim-faced, seeming to buckle under the weight of history as he walked through the camp's main gate with its cynical wrought-iron slogan: Arbeit Macht Frei — Work Will Set You Free. Of course what made the event even more emotional and charged was that this Pope was raised in southern Germany and at one time was coerced into being a member of the Hitler Youth. Later he was drafted into the Nazi Army but soon deserted, spending time in a US prison of war camp.

While the death toll for Auschwitz-Birkenau has never been completely established, estimates are that some 1.5 million people were executed at the hands of the Nazis in this one locale. More than one million of these were Jews, 75,000 were Poles, 20,000 were Gypsies, 10,000 were Russian prisoners of war, tens of thousands were homosexuals, and countless others were killed.

Pope Benedict began his sojourn in the camps with a prayer, "Lord, you are the Lord of peace. In a place like this, words fail. In the end, there can only be a dead silence, a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God. Why Lord, did you remain silent? How could you tolerate all this?"

A seminal moment in the visit came when the Pope met with 32 survivors of the Holocaust, spending time talking with each of them. They had lined up next to the wall of death, a cement wall covered with tar, where prisoners were beaten and shot.

The Pope stroked the hair of the women survivors, kissed the cheeks of one. He also visited the cell where Polish Franciscan Friar Maximilian Kolbe had been imprisoned. Kolbe is remembered for giving his life to spare a man with a large family, and was later canonized by the Catholic Church.

Another commentator suggested that this trip marked a shift in the relationship of the Catholic Church and the Holocaust. Pope Paul II tried to make amends for the apparent indifference of the wartime Vatican toward the Jews. Pope Benedict moved the process a step further by acknowledging that the camp was not only a starting point for dialogue between Christians and Jews, but also a place where ethical conversation had to take place between oppressors and the oppressed.

The details of the Pope's visit to Auschwitz were duly reported by most of the press, and to be expected, much of the commentary focused on the political and institutional intrigues. But I was struck by an article in the National Catholic Reporter which went beyond the boilerplate reporting to lay out the heart of what the Pope was trying to say in this visit. Beyond the symbolism and the media images, the Pope was seeking to bring some kind of biblical and theological interpretation to what happened 50 years ago.

According to John Allen Jr, Pope Benedict gave an alternative view to the horrific events in the concentration camps. "It was not, as commonly reported, only the stark realization of man's inhumanity to man, but also of man's inhumanity to God."

The final aim of the Nazi rampage of death, the Pope declared, was not just the extermination of the Jews, but it was the annihilation of any force higher than the human will to power. "Deep down these vicious criminals, by wiping out a people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide to humankind, principles that are eternally valid.

"If this people, by its very existence, was a witness to the God who spoke to humanity and took us to himself, then that God finally had to die and power had to belong to man alone, to those men, who thought that by force they had made themselves masters of the world. By destroying Israel, they ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and replace it with a faith of their own invention, faith in the rule of men, the rule of the powerful."

Furthermore, writes Allen, Pope Benedict argued that Christianity and Judaism both represented systems of thought that the Nazis instinctively understood must be destroyed, because without God and God's moral law there is no bulwark against totalitarianism, or against evil. He thus offered a profound sense of the starkness of the choice facing humanity: God or the abyss.

In an eloquent closing the Pope preached, "Let us cry out to God, with all our hearts, at the present hour, when all the forces of darkness seem to issue anew from human hearts: whether it is the abuse of God's name as a way of justifying senseless violence against innocent persons, or the cynicism which refuses to acknowledge God and ridicules faith in him. The God in whom we believe is a God of reason, a reason, to be sure, which is not a kind of cold mathematics of the universe, but is one with love and goodness. I pray that the logic of love and the recognition of the power of reconciliation and peace may prevail over the threats arising from irrationalism or from a spurious and godless reason."

While the Pope deliberately refrained from relating his remarks to any specific events of today, it is not hard to find parallels, as we still find those who seek to "annihilate any force higher than the human will to power." We still see forces which wish to kill the God who called Abraham and those who wish to become masters of the world, creating a faith of their own invention, the rule of the powerful.

Also not mentioned in any press accounts that I read was that the Pope quoted from a Psalm which has been central to the Jewish anguish over the Holocaust. Ponder the power and pathos of the words from Psalm 44:

But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies. You made us retreat before the enemy and our adversaries have plundered us. You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations. You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale. You have made us a reproach to our neighbor, the scorn and derision of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations, the people shake their head at us.

Our disgrace is with us all day long, and our face is covered with shame at the taunts of those who reproach and revile us, because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge. All this happened to us, though, we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant. Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. You crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals, and covered us over with deep darkness.

If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread our hands to a foreign God, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart. Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to

be slaughtered. Awake O Lord, Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself. Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? We are brought down to the dust, our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us, redeem us because of your unfailing love. (How this Psalm of lament captures the utter anguish of people's everywhere facing genocide!).

Roger Boyes gave a fascinating postscript of the visit of the Pope to Auschwitz-Birkenau:

Nearly 50 years ago, A.M. Rosenthal, the New York Times Warsaw correspondent, wrote what became a famous headline, 'There Is No News At Auschwitz.' He went on to describe how the mundane of the present exists in disquieting company alongside the horrors of the past. He recalls his unease at seeing the sunny row of poplars and hearing the sounds of town children playing just down the road from the remains of the furnaces. "It all seems frightfully wrong, as in a nightmare," he wrote. "It would be fitting if the sun never shone and the grass withered, because this is a place of unutterable horror."

Almost on cue as Pope Benedict's voyage drew toward its close, the wind picked up and a cool rain began to fall. The final ceremony began with the Pope pausing to pray at memorials in the different languages of the people killed. By the time he had reached the final plague, the rain had stopped, the umbrellas were tucked away and all could see across the broad field from the half-standing brick barracks of Birkenau a vivid rainbow had appeared. While Rosenthal would surely not have considered this news, on a day when the German people came to Auschwitz to ponder God's silence, that surprising explosion of colors seemed well worth reporting.

It is not the first time that a rainbow has provided God's promise of hope and love to a devastated and empty world, nor, hopefully, the last. Sometimes the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history. The Pope calls us to learn much more than this, so that such horrors never happen again.