

Signs of Humanity in Recent Events

I do not know if you find the same but when I am unwell the news seems even more depressing than usual. And so during my recent forced period of rest it was good to come across two more positive items of news showing genuine humanity. Though sad they were also affirmative, and, for our context here at St Martin's, inspiring examples of healing the wounds of history, and of learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity.

The first event took place on Monday in a Berlin cemetery when the microscopic remains of dozens of prisoners, most of them women, who were executed for resisting Adolf Hitler and whose bodies were used for research by Nazi doctors, were buried in a simple wooden box. The burial was preceded by an interfaith ceremony attended by descendants of the victims and others whose family members fought in the resistance against the Nazis, and led by a Protestant minister, a Roman Catholic priest and a rabbi.

It is estimated that of more than 2,800 prisoners who were executed at the nearby Plötzensee prison from 1933 to 1945 only 140 have known graves, since the authorities feared their graves could become rallying points for resistance. Many of the remains were used for dubious medical research purposes at what is still the city's main hospital. In recent years extensive research has been carried out to try to identify the victims. Monday's act may not have brought closure but it was an important step in trying to heal the wounds of history and to celebrate the courage and determination of those who resisted what they rightly perceived as a brutal and evil regime.

The other event was the death last week at the age of 90 of the founder of the L'Arche Community Jean Vanier. His passing was of course an occasion for sorrow, but also for celebration of the life and achievement of a remarkable man. His vision of people both with and without learning disabilities living together and learning from one another resulted in 140 L'Arche communities worldwide. His motivation was very much that of learning to live with difference and celebrating diversity. His concern for the weak and the vulnerable was both passionate and practical.

He was also a great reconciler, not least for Anglicans at the contentious Lambeth Conference of 1998 where he washed the Archbishop of Canterbury's feet and the other bishops followed suit, an act repeated at the Primates Meeting in 2017. Jean Vanier was an eminent philosopher and theologian and yet a humble man full of faith and love - love for God and for others.

And so we give thanks to God for Jean Vanier and his work for the weak and vulnerable, and we give thanks for those who resist evil at the cost of their own lives.

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17th May 2019