

Lessons from the Past

During my recent holiday in Germany I visited the former concentration camp of Sachsenhausen north of Berlin. As you can imagine it was a salutary experience to be in this place where tens of thousands lost their lives in the most cruel and painful way. It is a terrible testimony to the extreme depths of inhumanity which can be inflicted on fellow human beings.

It can be argued that we should not dwell on the past but instead move on. And yet it is important that places like Sachsenhausen should be there not just as a memorial but also as a warning. For the end of the Second World War did not see an end to genocide and acts of violent cruelty and oppression. Far from it. Such inhuman acts continue to be committed in our world today.

Education is an important function of places like Sachsenhausen and there were a number of young people there when I visited. The various displays focussed both on the perpetrators and the victims, and the individual stories were very moving. The camp was originally for opponents of the National Socialist regime. And there were many accounts of good men and women who stood up for democracy and freedom in the overwhelming face of a totalitarian and brutal regime. The largest number of those who were imprisoned and killed there, though, were prisoners of war, largely Russians, but even a few Britons. Outside the main enclosure there were some very poignant memorials.

If nothing else places like Sachsenhausen should challenge any complacency to which we might be tempted. Totalitarian regimes feed on fear. They take advantage of prejudices that are already there. Even in our own country there is prejudice against those who are perceived to be different. There is a temptation to look for scapegoats for the problems that we face.

As Christians we should challenge those prejudices. For the Good News of the Christian faith is that we are all loved by God, that we are all equal in God's sight, that we are all due respect and honour.

I was also able to visit two partners in the Community of the Cross of Nails, in Berlin and in neighbouring Potsdam. Peace and reconciliation are so needed in our world today, with all its tensions and challenges. And places like Sachsenhausen underline the continuing relevance of the aims of the Community of the Cross of Nails: to heal the wounds of history – wounds that are still there; to learn to live with difference and celebrate diversity – when conformity is so often the dominant ideology; and to build a culture of peace.

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