



Assembly: Reflections 2

We only have to switch on the TV news or open a newspaper to be aware that human beings are capable of the most appalling cruelty. In individual cases, this is awful enough, but there have been many times when whole tribes, nations or races of people have been targeted by others and persecuted to destruction. This week we are commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day, when we remember the time when most of Europe was gripped by Nazism.

The Nazis sought to wipe out any who were different from their fellow citizens in some way. They rounded up and killed Roma people, they imprisoned because they were Jehovah's Witnesses or because of their sexual orientation, and murdered people with various disabilities in cold blood. Those whom they hated the most were the Jews of Europe. Jewish people were hunted down and sent to camps where millions and millions perished in the most appalling circumstances.

After this, the world said, 'never again must we let this happen'. But it *has* happened again in places such as Rwanda, Bosnia and Cambodia, and Holocaust Memorial Day also provides an opportunity to learn from these events, too.

How can we learn from something so terrible? Surely the events are so unusual that they have nothing to teach us about our own lives? But all these genocides were begun when people were willing to believe that others were in some way inferior to them, that their very presence was a threat to the well-being of the rest of society and, even, that they were not really human. The Nazis used the word 'Untermenschen' – subhuman – for Jews and Roma. The Hutu leadership in Rwanda referred to the Tutsis as 'cockroaches'. When a Jew entered Auschwitz, a number was tattooed on the right arm. This was a further attempt to take away a person's humanity; you were known by a number, not your name.

If we fail to see the worth in other human beings, to acknowledge the fellow humanity in the eyes of another, we are allowing ourselves to slide along the same path. Racism and prejudice, if not fought, lead to death; this is the stark warning of Holocaust Memorial Day.

In our world, and in our lives, Holocaust Memorial Day teaches us never to be a bystander, and to guard against our own capacity for showing prejudice and intolerance, whether it be because someone is a different race, culture or faith, or is gay or is a disabled person.

I want to read you a poem by a well-known African American author, Maya Angelou. Maya experienced terrible discrimination in her society when she was growing up. In her poem called 'Human Family', Maya Angelou's words echo the sentiment behind the strap line for this year's Holocaust Memorial Day – 'Same. But Different'.

I note the obvious differences
In the human family.
Some of us are serious,
Some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived
As true profundity,
And others claim they really live
The real reality.

The variety of our skin tones
Can confuse, bemuse, delight,
Brown and pink and beige and purple,
Tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas
And stopped in every land,
I've seen the wonders of the world,
Not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women
Called Jane and Mary Jane,
But I've not seen any two
Who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different
Although their features jibe,
And lovers think quite different thoughts
While lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,
We weep on England's moors,
And laugh and moan in Guinea
And thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland,
Are born and die in Maine.
In minor ways we differ,
In major we're the same.

I note the obvious differences
Between each sort and type,
But we are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.

Moments of Reflection:

1. 'From the ends of the earth, from the beginning of the sky, from the depths of the water and the heights of the heavens: we are each dependent on another, sustained by another, in harmony with each other. We are the elements together which create the whole. We who walk upon the land are a horde

The Human Family by Maya Angelou, available in *I Shall Not Be Moved*. Rep. ed. paperback: Bantam Books, 1991

which cannot be counted, yet there are even more stars in the night sky. And each one is precious.'

Tradational: Native American

2. Muslim Prayer for Peace:

In the name of Allah,
the beneficent, the merciful.
Praise be to the Lord of the
Universe who has created us and
made us into tribes and nations
That we may know each other, not that
we may despise each other.
If the enemy incline towards peace, do
thou also incline towards peace, and
trust God, for the Lord is the one that
heareth and knoweth all things.
And the servants of God,
Most gracious are those who walk on
the Earth in humility, and when we
address them, we say "PEACE."

3. From 'Prayers for Today' by Frank Colquhoun:

'Your will be done on earth'
How often we say those words with an air of resignation, as though your will
were something to be endured, not enjoyed; a burden, not a blessing.
But your will is all that is for the welfare of humankind.
Your will is justice and peace, health and happiness, life abundant and freedom
for all.
So we pray that your will maybe done on earth, this earth, and be done *now*.
Nothing could be better for each one of us and for our world than that.

4. Sir Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi:

"It wasn't only the Jews. It was also the mentally ill, the physically handicapped,
the Gypsies and the gays who were imprisoned, tortured, shot, gassed and
turned to ash because they didn't fit someone's narrow template of what it
means to be human...Jews cannot fight anti-Semitism alone, Muslims cannot fight
Islamophobia alone, gays cannot fight homophobia alone. The victim cannot cure
the crime, the hated cannot cure the hater. We are as big or as small as the
space we make for others who are not like us. May the memory of the victims of
the Holocaust become our immune system against hate. May we stand together,
fighting prejudice together."

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