

Making Sense

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

Last Wednesday I was in London representing the Church at the National Holocaust Memorial Service. It was hosted jointly by the Foreign Office and the Israeli Embassy. It's always a challenging event, to be confronted by this particular horror from World War Two.

On Wednesday, one of the keynote speakers at the event was a tiny little Polish lady in her 80s, Mala Tribich. In 1939 her town in Poland was one of the first to be invaded by the German army, and her town was one of the first to have a Jewish ghetto, an area where a large number of Jewish families were crowded into a very restricted space. Mala was moved around the area, even for a short while finding a safe space with a family who brought her up as a Christian, but she wanted to be with her family. She was eventually rounded up from the ghetto and at the age of 12 became a work slave at Ravensbruck in 1944. Mala spoke movingly of the months she spent there, before she was transported in a cattle truck to Bergen-Belsen.

She met with unexpected kindnesses along the way, as well as unspeakable cruelty. At one point, in Belsen, shoes removed again, clothes removed again, shaved, and in the striped concentration camp clothing, she felt she no longer recognised herself, let alone the people around her. With her identity gone, her story no longer made sense to her. Who was she, what had happened to her family (all but her brother were wiped out in the holocaust)? She knew that to lose hope would be to lose survival. But she survived, barely alive, and was liberated from Belsen by British troops.

After she had spoken at the Holocaust event, she lit a candle of hope, and then a rabbi, who had escaped Holland as part of the *Kindertransport* in 1940, recited and sang a prayer.

I watched Mala during this religious ritual. Her face, initially hard because it had been hard to tell the story again, softened, and she wept quietly. I went over to her to thank her, and she said to me, "I have to keep telling the story, so long as I live. So that I can try to make sense of what happened; so that others can try to make sense of what happened." I said to her, "I don't know if

we can ever make sense of what happened, I know I can't. I don't ever want to be able to explain it, I simply think we need to keep remembering it, and calling it out when other evils in the world arise."

She looked at me for a moment and I wondered if I had said the wrong thing. She said to me, "You may be right. After all these years I still work to make it make sense. I say the prayers; I think I believe. But the prayers don't take it away. They don't make what happened make sense. But I have to keep saying them, because they help me make sense of what happens after. They give a hope I can't explain. Without hope there's no survival. And I have survived."

I'm still wrestling with that. Saying prayers to make sense of what happens after. I would also add reading and wrestling with the Bible, to make sense of what happens now, and after. Not every question has an answer, but that does not mean we are not supposed to ask, and wonder.

Which is how I believe we are to appropriate the Bible today. This complex, uplifting, perplexing library with its different styles and contexts is given to us to help us, at different times, to attempt to make sense of some of the big issues in life. And if it cannot always help us make absolute sense of what is going on around us or within us, it is given so that we might know that in the sense **and** the senseless times, we are not alone, and that others have gone before us with the same questions, and found the hope and strength to go on.

In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, our Old Testament reading, it was one of those sense and senseless times. The people of Israel had been in exile in Babylon and at last they had been allowed to return home. But the land was not one of milk and honey. It was a ruin, with broken walls and roofless houses and a shattered Temple. In that fractured time, when people were wondering out loud, "What is the point? Where is God in all of this? What are we supposed to think, or say, or do?" the wise people of the day gather the returned exiles, and took them back to their foundations. As they rebuilt their homeland, so they also needed to reconsider their values, and re-examine what it meant to be a people alive in their day, and with faith in their

day, and with God in their day. 1,500 years ago, this is what confused, dispirited people asked of themselves.

The Holy Book was brought, and the book was opened for everyone. And together, priests and people, bowed their heads to worship, and then read and listened, with interpretation. “They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Not all of what was read was easily understood, but together they worked at what was read and listened to, so that sense could be given to as much as possible. The living book needed living people to make sense of life. In the context of that day, as people read and listened, they discussed, and argued for and against, and sought to make sense of what they could.

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates is reputed to have said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Today, for Christians, I want to say that the unexamined faith is not worth believing. The 11th Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm, said that faith seeks understanding. Faith seeks through the experiences of life to help us make sense of what is going on, or at least to help us along the way as we make more discoveries. Like where hope comes from; like where help is to be found; like who we can trust; like why, even in the darkest of times, light will still shine even when everything else points to the opposite. It is not always the full answer to what we are asking, but it is at least an important signpost along the way.

Fast-forward around 500 years from the time of Nehemiah, to Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth. He too worships with the Holy book, opening it in front of the people, reading it, interpreting it, and letting it speak in to the people who were present. The part of the Bible Jesus read, from Isaiah, about being anointed, about bringing good news to the poor, about proclaiming release to the captives, about helping all who were blind (whatever their blindness) to see, about setting the oppressed free, and about proclaiming God’s great love – none of this was new. It was an old message in Jesus’ time. The people had heard it before on many occasions.

But the context was different now, and the story needed to be read again, and the people who heard it were challenged by Jesus to make sense of the story in a new way. The old book was

to be read in a new way; the old message was revealed to have a new meaning; the familiar passage was to have an unfamiliar twist because it was to be applied in a living way to the lives of the people who heard it in Jesus' time. They were meant to think and question and wonder what it meant. They were challenged to make sense of the passage in their own day because this living word had life in it still, and demanded to be reinterpreted and applied.

We do not always make sense of the Bible, or the stories of faith. They are not always easy. Some of their message maybe no longer applies, for the original context and purpose has been forgotten or lost in time. But it doesn't apply to the entire Bible. The Bible is not a compendium of little stories written down to make life easy, giving trite and glib answers to the complexities of life. It is not a text-book that gives us all of the answers at the back.

But it remains a living book which sometimes, through the hopes and struggles of ancient peoples who faced similar challenges to the ones we face today, speaks a word of comfort, encouragement, warning and hope to those who are brave enough to wrestle with it.

When the Israelites heard the old stories in the time when they were rebuilding their lives, they needed help to make sense of what those stories might mean in their 'here and now'. When Jesus read that old prophecy from Isaiah, the telling word I think He used is the word, "Today." "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Whatever it meant, it applied to the '**today**' of Jesus and the people in Nazareth.

Seventy-four years after being liberated from Bergen-Belsen, Mala Tribich, holocaust survivor, still says prayers and reads Scripture, to help her continue to make sense of the things that happened in her life, and to the things that are still happening in her life. She still questions and wonders and argues with the practice of faith, so that her today might still be touched by the living God, somehow.

When it doesn't quite make sense, God still remains. And that is, honestly, just about, enough.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen