

Christian liturgy – Auschwitz

Zen Peacemakers – Diana Vernooij, 29 May – 3 June 2023



Starting prayer

Spirit of God,
soften our critical eyes,
that we may see in warmth and compassion;
open our blocked ears,
that we may understand the language not known to us;
teach our minds to be wise,
we pray for gentleness and understanding.

Opening and introduction ...

Together: Prayer for forgiveness

Sometimes we flee,
we flee from our neighbour and from you, God,
we forget the sorrow of others,
we flee from ourselves,
we forget our true existence.

Seeking light,
we forget the other in darkness.
Seeking love,
we let the other languish.
Searching to spend our time,
we run away from ourselves.

Powerful and Tender God,
forgive our pettiness
and support us.
That we may live
with open eyes and open arms.
Amen

-Silence-

Texts of witnesses

Elie Wiesel - Night

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.

Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself.

Never.

Etty Hillesum

God, I try to look things straight in the face, even in the worst crimes, and to discover the small, naked human being amidst the monstrous wreckage caused by man's senseless deeds.

Victor Frankl

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the people who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance.

Song:

Wek mijn zachtheid weer
Geef mij terug de ogen van een kind
Dat ik zie wat is
En mij toevertrouw
En het licht niet haat.

Texts from the Bible

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the Eternal,
who made heaven and earth.

S/He will not let your foot be moved;
s/he who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, s/he who keeps you
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Powerful and Tender God is your keeper,
your shade on your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The Loving One will keep you from all evil;
and will keep your life.
The Gentle One will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.

Matthew 27:45-50

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah." Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian, was imprisoned by the Nazis because of the help he gave to the Jews who tried to flee Germany. He wrote this poem in the face of his imminent execution:

Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,
Still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;
Oh, give our frightened souls the sure salvation
for which, O Lord, You taught us to prepare.
And when this cup You give is filled to brimming
With bitter suffering, hard to understand,
we take it thankfully and without trembling,
out of so good and so beloved a hand.
By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,
And confidently waiting come what may,
we know that God is with us night and morning,
and never fails to greet us each new day.

Song:

Oh, mijn God,
Erbarmend, genadig, lankmoedig
Rijk aan liefde, rijk aan trouw,
Bewarend liefde, tot het duizendste geslacht.

Diana: contemplation

Here we are in Auschwitz, where 1.3 million people were deported to and, of whom about 1.1 million did not survive Auschwitz. The vast majority were Jews, one million Jews. Also murdered here and elsewhere were: Gypsies, prisoners of war, opponents, and people who for whatever reason were seen by the Nazis as Untermenschen: the disabled, the mentally ill, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, political opponents, the Slavic peoples, Freemasons.

Here we stand: descendants.

We are the descendants of those who survived,
descendants of those who resisted and helped people.

We are the descendants of those who stood by and did nothing,
descendants of those who contributed to the machinery of destruction and death.

Descendants, heirs, people who still feel the effects of it today
as well as people whom it barely touched, to whom it all passed.

When things are too terrible to face, we tend to run away, to deny, to blame others, to distract ourselves, to be annoyed by little things –
so that we don't have to face what happened, what our parents or grandparents had to suffer or what our parents or grandparents had caused, and what it did to us.

It is too terrible to face - that is the reason we are here.
To see, to recognize, to not run away,
To share what it evokes, what it does to us.

What is shattered here is:

Our image that all people are decent and virtuous,
that the good will triumph over the evil in the end,
our image that our God is a loving God, a God who watches over us and answers our prayers –
those images are shattered here in Auschwitz.

And yet, yet, there is our deep possibility of freedom to respond differently than the killing machine has led us to believe.

Deep within us lives a power we sometimes call God-in-us that enables us to cut through the bitterness, to not be distracted.

We do have the possibility to go on our path with a clear mind and an open warm-blooded heart,
not knowing what to do, but being here and pouring love towards it all.

So may it be,
So may we be here together.

Amen

Wisława Szymborska – Could have

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck – there was a forest.
You were in luck – there were no trees.
You were in luck – a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake.
A jamb, a turn, a quarter-inch, an instant...

So you're here? Still dizzy from
another dodge, close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or
speechless.
Listen, how your heart pounds inside me.
-silence-

Together: Creed

I believe in the Powerful and Tender One,
The One who calls the world to life
and asks for our response.

I believe in Jesus, in whom I recognize the human being
as God intended us to be.

I believe in the Spirit of discernment,
in us alive as bright fire.

I believe in a community that, equipped with the
power of the Spirit, gives freedom to people.

And I am sure, that God is near
And that S/He smiles in us.

Diana: in our Christian liturgy at the end we open up to the people around us, the people in the rest of the world, to pray for them, to open our hearts and be with them, now and the time to come.

Prayers of the faithful

Immeasurable, be with us, be in us, be us,
so we can be faithful to our deepest call:
to be with those who suffer and to be with their suffering.

Diana: If any of you want to share a short prayer please do:

...

Beloved God,
Because it is inconvenient or unbearable
to stay when it gets hard:
teach us how to blossom truth and justice,
compassion and solidarity.

Be faith in us, be the love
that gives us the strength
to be with it all.

So that we can sincerely feel and say:
“Your heart pounds in me”.

Song:

Nada te turbe
Nada t’espante
Solo Dios basta!

***Together: The New Zealand Anglican Lord's Prayer
- The New Zealand Book of Prayer | He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa***

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever.

Amen

Diana: now we have arrived at the end of this liturgy and I would like to ask for a blessing together with you over today and tomorrow, over our stay here in Auschwitz and over our further lives.

Diana: Prayer of blessing

May the Powerful and Tender One be with us
Today and all the days of our lives to come.
May S/He open our eyes and our arms
so we will live our lives without judgments,
with our hearts full of fire,
we will reach out with attention and openness.

Blessed are your eyes, that they may see in every person the story of the One,
Blessed are your lips, that they may speak words of consolation,
Blessed are your hands, that they may give and receive love.

May the path carry us,
May the wind be at our backs,
and the sun shine on our faces.
May our deepest being,
The One in our lives,
always be very close to us.

Amen



In Auschwitz 1

Prayers English

In Auschwitz 1:

Gone to where we can,
here at the border we stand
in the light of death, darkness, pain,
the cry of injustice.
And we remember the old promise
that life changes but is not taken away
that nothing and no one is lost.

We are soul-bound to all those who have been killed here
soul-bound to each other
with the forces of life
and the darkness of death
with all that changes, day and night.
What comes and goes, expected and unexpected
born, carried, dashed
in the darkest of the night
and reborn in all the colors of the rainbow
with the richness and the pain:
may it come to peace.
Amen

Near the Ashpond:

Powerful One and Tender One,
Mother of Sorrows,
You who sees the wounds, the pain, death.
With your tender love,
with your open arms,
carrying us,

Be with us,
Be in us,
Be us.

So we can open our arms and hearts
Tender caring,
And be here and now.

Amen