

Impressum

Madhu Pandya: Our town remembers the Holocaust

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This speech was written for the Holocaust Memorial Day in Blackburn, Lancashire, in 2005.

Madhu Pandya is the Chairman (2004-2005) of the Interfaith Council in Blackburn, Lancashire, UK, an organisation which fosters good relations and better understanding between the different religious communities living in Blackburn. 20% of the population of Blackburn is Muslim and comes from India and Pakistan. Madhu Pandya belongs to the small Hindu community living in Blackburn and is a member of its Executive Committee. She teaches at Blackburn College (Mathematics, English for Adults, English as a Second Language, English Literacy, Gujarati).



The Interfaith Council organised the 2005 National Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony (officially 27 January, but moved to Sunday, 30 January, for calendar convenience). It took place at Blackburn Cathedral, the official civic church of Blackburn, and was attended by Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and non-believers. The text which follows is Madhu Pandya's planned opening speech on that occasion. She replaced it in the end by some brief introductory remarks to make space for other speakers.

Madhu Pandya: Our Town Remembers the Holocaust



Snow covered rails
outside Auschwitz concentration camp

I welcome you all to the Fifth National Holocaust Memorial Day. Sixty years ago on this day, in 1945, the Auschwitz extermination camp was liberated, and the horrors of the holocaust became known to the world.

You will hear thoughts and prayers from our Borough's main faiths and civic leaders.

This day gives us an opportunity to show our respect for the victims and the survivors of Nazi persecution and mass murder.

Each of us will honour the victims of the holocaust by working that the seeds of the holocaust cannot take root in our town. We will remember the divine spark that resides in every human being. We will remember that every man or woman feels pain as we do and loves his friends and family as we do. There are no sub-humans! Even animals love life and feel pain and deserve to be protected.

When meeting a member of a persecuted group we will hear in our hearts Shylock's plaint:

"I am a Jew.

Hath not a Jew eyes?

Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses,
affections, passions?

Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons,
subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a
Christian is?

If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?
And if you wrong us, do we not suffer?" (01)

This could equally well have been said

- by an innocent British Muslim under attack from his white fellow citizens after the 11th of September,
- by a Hindu or a Muslim in one of the conflicts on the Indian subcontinent,
- by a low-caste Hindu abused by a member of a higher caste in India,
- by an African or a Jamaican when Damilola Taylor (02) was murdered in November 2000,
- by a Tutsi or a Hutu in Rwanda, (03)
- by a Catholic or Protestant in Northern Ireland,
- by any Palestinian or Israeli,
- by an Iraqi prisoner humiliated or tortured by American soldiers (04)
- by any Gipsy, homosexual, mentally retarded person, or political dissenter about to be murdered in a concentration camp, (05)
- or even by an American when attacked by a terrorist.

Let us remember Shylock's plaint with compassion whenever we meet a member of another group, especially when he, or she, is in danger or is suffering abuse from others.

We cannot be complacent, for the womb in which the holocaust was bred is still fertile, not only in other countries. (06)

Let us treat even animals and the environment with respect: because they too have the divine spark. If we protect animals, we cannot possibly ever kill a person even if a perverted government or propagandist declares this person to be subhuman.



Nazi soldiers
stepping over smouldering heap of corpses

'Thou shalt not kill' is the greatest commandment. We must instil it into our children from the day they are born in its most basic form: 'Thou shalt not hurt any sentient being'. (07)

A nation which has that commandment deeply ingrained in its bones cannot possibly carry out actions which even remotely approach those of the holocaust. Children brought up in that spirit will not be given guns, not even as toys.

Some victims of the holocaust met their death because they were refused asylum (08) in this and other countries. Let us therefore honour them by treating those who seek asylum now with respect and compassion and befriend them when we meet them.

The Bible, which rules the lives of Jews and Christians alike and is profoundly respected by all Muslims, says:

"If a stranger lives with you in your land, you shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for once **you** were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:33-34 = 3. Book of Moses 19:33-34) (09)

Most of the victims of the holocaust were not even strangers in the land in which they lived: they were German fellow citizens. Let nothing remotely like this ever happen in our community.

The lesson we will learn is that we are all citizens of Blackburn with Darwen. We will set an example to other towns for a sensible way of living together. We will protect one another. Our slogan will be: 'Don't touch my mate'. (10)

Instead of making big declarations, which seldom lead to practical action, each of us can start in his own backyard, with his immediate neighbours, in his own street, in the supermarket, at work, or wherever he meets a member of a different community.

It is not enough to be politically correct, to be tolerant or not to be racist or to swear never to commit genocide: most of us will mercifully never have to make such grand decisions. Most of us believe that we are not racists. But that is not enough.

We have to be more positive. We can, and should, invite our neighbours (from other communities) into our homes, eat with them, talk to them, discover how they live, discover that they are humans like us, and we should do what we can to make their lives more pleasant. It starts with a smile and a greeting in the street.

This will help not only our neighbours. It will also enrich our own lives, it will make us happier. Acting in that spirit will be much better for us than regarding our neighbours with incomprehension, suspicion, revulsion or contempt.



Heap of corpses in mass grave

When we see that any of our fellow citizens is attacked, we will speak up for him and protect him as if he were our own son or brother - and all this goes, of course, also for women.

This is how we will make our town a better and a happier place. This is how we will honour those who died in the holocaust.

Thank you.

Multi-Faith Blackburn



Blackburn Cathedral,
Blackburn's civic church,
and statue of Queen Victoria



Blackburn: Two mosques
overlooking the Whalley Range



Mosque and Islamic College
in Clinton Street, Blackburn



Blackburn Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Atheists are in this group visiting a Hindu temple. They will never throw bricks at one another. This is one of several events organised by the Interfaith Council of Blackburn with Darwen.



Members of Blackburn Hindu Centre on their excursion to a Temple in Wales (Skanda Vale)



Gospel Hall, Blackburn: redundant



Blackburn: Apostolic Church at the edge of a Muslim Quarter (Whalley Range)



Language diversity:
Rosetta Stone in Multi-lingual Blackburn:
English, Urdu, Gujarati

^Notes

1. Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice 3:1)
2. Damilola_Taylor was a Nigerian boy killed in South London by boys from Caribbean families. There is a traditional racist animosity between Caribbean and African communities.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Damilola_Taylor
3. "The Rwandan genocide, also known as the genocide against the Tutsi, occurred from 7 April to 19 July 1994 during the Rwandan Civil War." Wikipedia:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_genocide
4. Torture and pointless abuse was infamously carried out by American soldiers in Iraq, e.g. in the Abu Ghraib prison. There are other examples.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_torture_and_prisoner_abuse
5. The Nazis murdered six million Jews, but also many Roma (Gipsies), mentally handicapped people and political dissenters.
6. "the womb is fertile still": This image refers to a poem by Bertolt Brecht (Epilogue to the play 'The Stoppable Rise of Arturo Ui'):

<p>Ihr aber lernet, wie man sieht statt stiert Und handelt, statt zu reden noch und noch. So was hätt einmal fast die Welt regiert! Die Völker wurden seiner Herr, jedoch Daß keiner uns zu früh da triumphiert - Der Schoß ist fruchtbar noch, aus dem das kroch!</p>	<p>But learn to see and do not stare transfixed in horror, Do act and do not to talk incessantly. That Nazi vermin almost might have ruled the world! The nations managed to defeat it, but Let none of us rejoice too soon - Still fertile is the womb from which that vermin crawled!</p> <p>(Translated by Klaus Bung?)</p>
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7. The brutalisation of thought and the loss of moral inhibitions:

 "The evil of Nazi ideology did not come from nowhere. There was definitely a process that led up to the brutalisation of thought and the loss of moral inhibitions." (German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder at the UN General Assembly's session on Monday, 24 Jan 2005, to mark the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.)
 Source:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4204465.stm>
8. Jewish asylum seekers refused admission to the UK: Similar accusations have arisen concerning Switzerland.

Sources:

<http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Holocaust/Kelly.html>, a review by Sean Kelly, University of Sheffield, a book by Louise London: "Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust". Cambridge University Press, London, 2001

Quotes from the review: "[Louise] London states that Britain did not view Jewish refugees in a humanitarian light, but through the eyes of self-interest. More could have been done in trying to assist Jews fleeing from Nazi Germany and also to permit the shattered remnants of European Jewry to enter post-Holocaust Britain."

"... Even with visas, however, the government and, more specifically, the Home Office, were reluctant to outline immigration policy. As London effectively shows, the government maintained this policy of trying to avoid having a policy throughout the period that she examines. By not having a specific policy, the government could be as restrictive or as compassionate as it (or rather the Home Secretary) chose to be...."

"... London's work goes beyond September 1939, when all issued visas were cancelled on the outbreak of war. She emphasises the government's reluctance to admit Jewish refugees during the war and the consistent government line that the rescue of Jews was not a war aim. In fact, the government maintained that the only way to rescue European Jewry was for the Allies to win the war in the shortest possible time. This is the most contentious part of the book ..."

"...The government's largest failure was not its failure to the rescue European Jews, something that was impossible to do. The failure was, first, to keep silent on what was happening in Nazi Europe. More information about the Holocaust should have been made public, along with more specific mention of the fact that the Jews were being persecuted and exterminated because of their race. Second, the government's complete denial that the rescue of Jews was impossible should not have deflected them from attempting to ascertain if something could have been done. When opportunities did arise, the government sought to find a way to avoid doing anything to assist the Jews, rather than seeing if the opportunity could be exploited. ..."

"... Britain did not do enough to save Jews from the Holocaust, more refugees could have been admitted, but governments remained keen to exclude them because of their very Jewishness. London amasses a substantial body of evidence to back up these arguments...."

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9. you were strangers in the land of Egypt: According to the Biblical account, to escape from droughts, crop failures and starvation, one Israelite family (the family of Joseph) settled in Egypt, and their descendants over generations became a huge ethnic minority. They eventually had much to suffer from the resentment of the native Egyptian population. This ancient story has much in common with the experiences of black and Asian immigrants and their descendants into the UK (and other countries) and their unpleasant experiences there. In ancient Egypt it culminated in brutal oppression. The Israelites know how hard it is to be a stranger in a foreign country: then and over the subsequent centuries of persecution. That's why GOD commands them (and all of us) to be kind to the strangers they meet.

The story of Joseph and his descendants can be found in the Bible (Genesis, ch. 37 ff; continued throughout the Book of Exodus). The story of how God liberated the Israelites by forcing the Pharaoh to let them leave Egypt has been popularised in the film Exodus.

10. 'Don't touch my mate': 'Ne touche pas a mon pote': This was the slogan of the French anti-racism campaign in the 1980s and 1990s.

A HINDU PRAYER FOR HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY

A Hindu Prayer

Lord, give me courage to do good,
to resist evil
and to protect those who are weak,
despised and persecuted.
Let me not be a coward and follow the mob.
Let me not, out of cowardice, turn a blind eye
to the suffering of others.

Let me treat the stranger like God.

Even if I am able to protect only one person,
I can make a world of difference to that person.

Lord, free me from desire, fear and anger.*

Note: *Gita 5:28: icchaa, bhaya, krodha: desire, fear and anger

OM	OM
May there be peace in Heaven.	dyau shantih
May there be peace in the sky.	antariksham shantih
May there be peace on earth,	prithivi shantih
peace in the waters,	apah shantih
peace in all the plants	oshadaya shantih
and peace in all the trees.	vanaspataya shantih
May all the Gods have peace.	vishvedeva shantih
May there be peace in Brahman.	brahman shantih
May there be peace everywhere.	sarvam shantih
Peace, peace and only peace.	shantir eva shantih
May the same peace be everywhere.	sama shantir edhih
OM, peace, peace, peace	om shanti shanti shantih

(Shanti Mantra, from the Rig Veda)

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