A Service to mark the 20th anniversary of the National Holocaust Centre
26th June 2016
Westminster Abbey
The Dean

It is a commonplace too little remarked that the capacity for good and evil is within all of us.

We see newspaper headlines that identify people who have committed unspeakable crimes as animals or worse. Dregs. And we place them in a category of their own. Criminals. Scum. Lock them up. Throw away the key. We may be justly horrified and alarmed at what they have done. And we may not possibly conceive that we could ourselves do anything so horrible, so demeaning. But a small part of our revulsion comes from a recognition that our own control of our baser instincts and motivations is not as strong as we would like to think. We are all capable of terrible evil. For we are all driven by our own selfish desires, not just by a need for survival, but by a longing to be dominant, to be on top, to win.

On the other hand, we are also capable of tremendous good. Deep in our human nature is a capacity for love, a longing for love, which translates widely into love for family, love for friends, love for the community, and can extend to generous acts of loving kindness and goodness even for people we do not know and never expect to meet.

Both capacities, for good and evil, for love and hate, are before us today as we recall the dreadful and inescapable historic reality of the holocaust, the planned, administered and mechanised destruction of six million Jews and others in the 1930s and 40s, and also the response to that

horror that led a Christian family twenty years ago to found in their own home a centre dedicated to remembering, keeping alive, the lessons of history, in order to prevent it ever happening again.

To visit the National Holocaust Centre in the English East Midlands is to have the opportunity of listening to the personal testimony of survivors, who generously tell their stories again and again and many of whom are now recording them for posterity. It is also to have the opportunity of entering directly into the experience of a small Jewish boy in Germany, as he is alienated and victimised by teachers and by fellow pupils, and sees his family livelihood and comfort stripped away, and himself sent away on a journey far from family and community into the unknown. The testimonies, the images and the experiences leave a lasting impression that has the power to transform attitudes and to liberate the capacity to empathise with the suffering and thus to enliven the will to prevent its recurrence. Twenty thousand school children each year, many from difficult and divided communities, themselves from a great diversity of backgrounds, are thus having their attitudes and their wills transformed. It is a wonderful achievement that we celebrate and for which we give thanks to almighty God today, as we wish it well for the future.

The need for the work of a National Holocaust Centre will always remain. At services here in the past few years, marking the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht and then more recently the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, we too have heard powerful testimony from survivors. But we have also commemorated the centenary of the Armenian massacres, also called genocide, and the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacres, also called genocide. Man's inhumanity to man, casual or intentional, is a constant reality. We have seen it most recently in the horrific murder of people in a gay club in Orlando,

Florida, and of course in the brutal killing of Jo Cox while doing her parliamentary and civic duty in her own constituency. And meanwhile the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the continuing suffering in Libya, the brutalisation of the Yazidis, the story of hatred and destruction goes on. There is much to think about. There is much to do. Thank God there are people willing to do it.

Thank God, I say. Do we? Do we not sometimes in our heart of hearts blame God? Why did God create a world in which men and women and children can act so selfishly, so cruelly, and other men and women and children suffer so terribly? If God is all-loving and all-powerful, how can all this happen? This question leads people to doubt the reality of God, even to despise God. And thus they are left only with destructive self-belief, misplaced self-confidence, rampant self-centredness, the very causes of hatred and violence.

As we know, this is no new question but one that has challenged religious thinkers through the centuries. We find it discussed right at the beginning of the Bible. In the second account of the creation in the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are warned by God not to eat of the fruit of one of the trees. The serpent beguiles them and they eat. Popular accounts speak of an apple. That misses the point. The tree is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They eat the fruit. They lose their innocence. Now they know that they are naked. They are ashamed. They use fig leaves to cover their embarrassment. God ejects them from the garden of Paradise.

Theologians talk about the Fall and Original Sin. But consider for a moment. It is essential to our humanity that we have the power to choose. Without choice, there would certainly be no fear, no hatred, no conflict, no warfare, but also there would be no change, no development,

no growth, no personality, in the end no love. There would be no humanity. We would be automata, robots. We choose wrongly. This we know. We suffer the consequences. But we choose. We choose to love or to hate. We choose to do good or to do evil. We choose to love our neighbour or to hate our neighbour, to love God or to despise God. Choice, the possibility of choice, the freedom to choose, to make our own decisions: all this is fundamental to our humanity. God gave us choice. The tree was there. Adam and Eve ignored God's instructions. They defied God. Bitter things followed. And we wrestle with choice. The power to choose is our glory and our shame.

And people suffer from the devastatingly wrong choices, the selfish choices others make. Abel suffered at the hands of his brother Cain, East of Eden. Job's suffering was different. God allowed Satan to put him to the test, to see whether, if he suffered, he would deny and despise God. He endured the suffering and triumphed over it. He came to see that, from his human perspective, it would be absurd to suppose that he could interpret the decisions and actions of almighty God.

But we cannot believe in a capricious God, a cruel God, a God whose wrath is turned against the righteous. The purpose of the creation surely is loving. And the providence of God is against the evil-doers, and compassionate to the poor and weak, the downtrodden, the suffering. The prophet Micah came to understand that and to see the role of human beings within God's providence. 'What does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?'

Christians came to believe that the story of Jesus shows us God sharing in the suffering of humanity and through his death and resurrection transforming into hope the suffering of individuals, the despair of the world. So this great story is a powerful motivating force for actions of

generous and compassionate love for all people whatever their circumstances, whatever their belief.

And whatever our circumstances, whatever our belief, may our prayer this evening be that we can all play our part in building a world where people of every diversity are enriched by one another and come to live in harmony together and at peace in the world, a world made and loved by God!