

A Report for St. George's Trust in relation to grant from St. George's Trust SGY19-1

I have just returned from my sabbatical which was supported by a grant from the St. George's Trust. I want to thank you enormously for your support and I enclose the following report to outline what I did on my sabbatical and what I have learnt through my time away.

An outline of how the weeks were spent

The 13 weeks of my sabbatical from 21st January - 20th April 2019 were divided up as follows:

Monday 21st January to Friday 1st February - in a Hermitage at Crawley Down Monastery

Reading:

- + theological texts about God and suffering
- + accounts of the Holocaust and the concentration camp system
- + autobiographies/biographies of people whose lives were bound up with the suffering.

Reflecting on all I was reading (including writing notes) and seeking God's insight into all I was discovering.

The weekends were spent at home with my family.

Saturday 2nd February to Thursday 14th February - in a cottage in Corfe Castle, Dorset

Continuing to read and reflect. At this time I watched several films and documentaries including personal testimony concerning the Holocaust. I also made the most of the beautiful countryside with a number of walks to keep my mind and body fresh.

Friday 15th February to Friday 22nd February - in a cottage in Corfe Castle, Dorset

I enjoyed half-term with my wife and children who joined me at the cottage in Corfe Castle so we could have a fun time together before my trip to Europe. We had some lovely walks, fun excursions and meals together.

Saturday 23rd February to Thursday 28th March - in Europe

Over the course of 34 days I travelled extensively within Poland, Germany and even to the Czech Republic, seeing places whose history are bound to the evils perpetrated during WW2. My aim was to connect the learning prior to my trip with the experience of being "there" - to try and listen to what I sensed God was saying as I journeyed and dwelt in places. I kept a diary of reflections for the whole period of my sabbatical, but whilst in

Europe each day I emailed my wife and parents and described in detail all I'd seen each day and how it had affected me. When I had new insights these were noted. I also spent time each day reviewing my photographs to provoke reflection.

My journey through Europe in sequence include spending time in:

Germany:

Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp
Neuengamme Concentration Camp (near Hamburg)
The Death March Museum (near Wittstock)

Poland:

Chelmno [Kulmhof] Extermination Camp
Treblinka Extermination Camp
Belzec Extermination Camp
Majdanek Concentration and Extermination Camp
Plaszow Concentration Camp
Krakow - where I visited site of former Jewish ghetto and Oskar Schindler's Factory
Auschwitz-Birkenau (3 days)
Gross-Rosen Concentration Camp

Germany:

Dresden - where I spent time in a city destroyed by Allied bombing in 1945

Czech Republic:

Terezin - a Jewish Ghetto established in a military fortress town

Germany:

Mittelbau - Dora Concentration Camp
Buchenwald Concentration Camp
Flossenburg Concentration Camp
Nuremberg - where I visited the places where the Nazi Party had held their yearly rallies and the courtroom where the famous War Crimes Trial after end WW2 was held.

France:

Natzweiler-Struthof Concentration Camp

Friday 29th March to Sunday 31st March - at home

A few days at home spending a really lovely catch up time with family. Also catching up with washing clothes etc after nearly 5 weeks away!

Monday 1st April to Thursday 11th April - in a Hermitage at Crawley Down Monastery

A time of reflection. These 2 weeks were spent writing reflectively, seeking to summarise the main findings from my time away and answer the question where is God in the midst of suffering and evil.

The weekend between spent at home with family.

Saturday 13th April to Thursday 18th April

Attending Spring Harvest Christian Conference at Minehead in Somerset with the family where we had fabulous teaching (including Archbishop of Canterbury) and some great fun together.

Friday 19th April to Saturday 20th April

At home with family preparing for return to work on Easter Sunday.

What have I discovered through my period of sabbatical?

Firstly the 13 weeks of my sabbatical have provided an extra period of time with my family on holiday that I don't normally have which was an incredibly precious time, and time to be totally refreshed. Moreover time away makes you appreciate your family even more – absence truly does make the heart grow stronger. These weeks though busy when abroad, have also given me plenty of time to be refreshed and re-energised, and I have returned to work fresher and more excited for the coming months than in a long time – praise God!

In relation to my theological study, the sabbatical has provided some of the richest, most valuable experiences of my life, and what I have learnt has left an indelible impression on me that will undoubtedly affect my life, and I pray facilitate a more effective and more compassionate future ministry.

Firstly my 4 weeks at the start of the sabbatical spent reading theological texts about God and suffering, particularly in relation to the Holocaust, was a time of enrichment and reflection which would have been impossible in the usual run of parish life. I believe it is always right to seek the theological wisdom of others alongside discerning understanding and I greatly valued the insights from books such as "A Theology of Auschwitz" by Ulrich Simon, "The Crucified God" by Jürgen Moltmann, and "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God" by Marilyn McCord Adams. To read these texts alongside the testimonies of people whose lives were bound up with the suffering of the evil perpetrated by the Nazis in WW2 was powerful.

However, the greatest impression on me was made through nearly 5 weeks travel in Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and France, where I visited:

- a) 5 extermination camps (including Auschwitz) where in total over 3 million Jewish people were murdered;
- b) 8 concentration camps where inmates were literally worked to death in insanitary conditions due to malnutrition;
- c) the sites of 2 former ghettos for the Jewish people prior to their deportation usually to a death camp;
- d) several cities (Lublin and Krakow in Poland, and Dresden and Nuremberg in Germany) whose histories have been shaped by the events of the Holocaust, the excesses of the Nazis and the Allied victory.

Having stood in places where thousands of people suffered and seen at first hand such sights as the railway ramp into Auschwitz and the gas chambers which claimed over a million Jewish lives, I have at times been overwhelmed. It has made me realise the extent of the crimes and evil, whose scale cannot be comprehended through mere words. Yet throughout my journey, often in places like Treblinka (where probably 900,000 people were murdered) as the only visitor on site, I was able to pray, asking God to somehow redeem the evil perpetrated and reveal what I needed to grasp.

I have discovered a greater appreciation of God's love for the Jewish people and his on-going plan for the Chosen People; moreover I have sensed in passages like Mark 13.14-20 where Jesus speaks about the future challenges, perhaps an allusion to the Holocaust. I have also through looking at the trial and death of Jesus found links between his inhumane treatment and that of the Jewish people by the Nazis. This has led me to appreciate that not only was Jesus in some way with the people as they suffered, but he truly did understand their suffering as a result of all he experienced. This has led me to realise that though the victims of the Holocaust were at the whim of the Nazis, God did not abandon them, for through their terrible deaths they will have found eternal rest with the Father.

These thoughts which grew as I journeyed were cemented by my experiences first at Buchenwald and then Flossenburg Concentration Camp. In these places memorials were laid out in the grounds which spoke profoundly into all I had begun to piece together. At Buchenwald the memorial was conceived from an ideology of a supposed communist victory over Fascism. Yet the journey down a slope with pictures reflecting the horrors of the camp, to the sites of 3 mass graves and then up the hillside to a memorial tower illuminated like a lighthouse, reflected for me the pattern of Jesus walking alongside the victims, willingly laying down his life for the sins of the world (mirroring going down the slope into the horrors and the realm of death). The Easter tradition of the harrowing of hell fits well with the mass graves at the bottom of the slope, with Jesus visiting those in the realms of the graves. Then of course the memorial tower, like a lighthouse at the top of the slope, spoke to me of Christ's resurrection, his victory over death, so that the people who suffered indeed find new life in him.

The very next day at Flossenburg Concentration camp, I was astonished to find Christian Polish former prisoners of the camp had set up a "Valley of Death" which not only repeated a journey, this time down a hillside via the camp crematorium to mass graves, and then up the other side, but had then placed a Church, the Church of Jesus in the Dungeon at the top of the hillside at the end of the memorial path. This church contains a stained glass window of Christ reaching down from the cross to embrace prisoners, and an altar piece of the crucified Lord flanked by typical scenes from camp life. These prisoners, who had experienced horrible conditions in the local quarry and brutal treatment by the guards, recognised Jesus had accompanied them during their time in the camp, and therefore they had built the church to reflect their experiences. Their experiences and thoughts are the most valuable testimony of all in regard to the question of where is God in the midst of evil – He is there alongside those suffering.

I believe therefore that in relation to the title for my sabbatical, I have indeed discovered a deeper appreciation that God journeys with His people even when the most profound evil is committed. He cannot stop all evil because of human freewill, yet he can bring the reassurance of His presence to those suffering as Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel testified on p75 of his book "Night":

The SS men hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour.

"Where is God? Where is he?" someone asked behind me.

As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time I heard the man call again "Where is God now?"

And I heard a voice in myself answer "Where is he? He is here, he is hanging there on the gallows..."

I believe this deeper and considerably more profound appreciation of where God can be found where evil is manifest will have a huge impact on my future parish ministry. I believe it will affect my future work not only when I am dealing with human tragedies and terrible pastoral situations, such as the funeral of a murdered son I took a year ago, but also on a day to day basis. On a simple level my own daily challenges fade into insignificance alongside the trials of Holocaust victims. But more profoundly, I think it will transform how I love the people I serve, as I don't believe I will ever make judgements about people in the same way again. Seeing the result of ignorance and judgementalism at its extreme in the Holocaust, brings Jesus words about the importance of what we think into sharp focus.

I am hugely grateful to the board of the St. George's Trust for the grant I was given which has enabled me to embark on a truly life-changing sabbatical. I could never have afforded the trip without your support. I trust that my feedback following my sabbatical shows that your support of my sabbatical was indeed justified.

With many thanks,

Yours in Christ,
Richard Coldicott (Revd Dr)