

entrust us with the sacred task
to give their deaths some final meaning:
We crown life itself with freedom,
So honouring the dead gone before us.¹

Yes, we do this as we celebrate the liberation – we honour the dead – also for our own sake. We openly embrace all that fill our thoughts in our own day:

Our worries, fears and grievances, our energies and our promises, our hopes and our doubts. Our mistrust and our trust. Our anger and our joy. Our courage and our despondency.

We carry with us the knowledge of the need of many in our day – our helplessness and our willingness to help. Our questions of how we can overcome hatred and war – and how justice and peace can reign over the world and between all people. How we must organise our society so that as many people as possible can live in dignity. We find in the words Jesus gave us a way in which this might be possible.

The evangelist Luke set out his message quite early on in his gospel:

to proclaim good news to the poor; to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to set the oppressed free, (Lk 4,18)

The evangelist Matthew left it further to the end before Jesus says:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you invited me in,
I needed clothes and you clothed me,
I was sick and you looked after me,
I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ (Mt 25,34 ff)

Interceding for the dignity and rights of all people – not merely posthumously for the dead – has been the concern and legacy of the survivors in the three generations that have passed since.

As we today celebrate here together our service, we strengthen our demand. Let us be emboldened by our communal prayer to receive the message anew and to bring this legacy to fruition. Amen.

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Translation: Roy Scivier

¹ Aus dem Gedicht „Unsere Toten“ von Paul Hussarek, in: Mein Schatten in Dachau, Gedichte und Biographien der Überlebenden und Toten des Konzentrationslagers, München 1993, S. 288f (* 02.08.1903 in Mährisch-Aussee / Tschechoslowakei - + 1964 in Bad Ems), bis 1938 Sprecher deutscher Sendungen beim Prager Rundfunk, Übersetzer, Autor und Korrektor. Am 10. September 1940 von der Gestapo verhaftet, weil er Mitherausgeber des in einem jüdischen Verlag erschienenen Werkes „Bedeutende Frauen unserer Zeit“ war und wurde am 14. März 1941 in das Konzentrationslager Dachau eingeliefert, wo er im April 1945 befreit wurde. Danach arbeitete er beim Kriegsgräbersuchdienst und wurde Kulturreferent beim Bund der Vertriebenen.

76th anniversary of the Liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp
Sunday, May 2nd 2021
Ecumenical Service of Remembrance
in the Carmelite Convent of the Precious Blood

Text: Luke 19:37-40 (Kantate Sunday)

“If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

The short passage we just heard from the Gospel according to Luke portrays a particular kind of encounter:

Jesus is on route to Jerusalem – even before he has reached his destination he has an initial, very short confrontation, and more are still to come.

His arrival is almost theatrical, not to mention ambiguous.

On the one hand he is riding on an animal that for someone claiming to be King of Kings is completely beneath him, on the other hand he is accompanied by the acclamation of his followers, who direct their prayers to the God most high:

Luke 19

- ³⁷ When he came near the place
where the road goes down the Mount of Olives,
the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God
in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:
³⁸ “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”
“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”
³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus,
“Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”
⁴⁰ “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

It seems as if the jubilant disciples cannot have noticed or accepted that Jesus' arrival on a donkey will in the end lead to Him being ridiculed. The journey to the Cross was regarded by the disciples' contemporaries as the utmost folly. Even today many people would agree with this assessment. And in many other places in the scriptures Jesus is likened to a servant, a slave

What of this should be remarkable or worthy of honour?

The evangelist goes on to depict these final days of Jesus' life, from the entry into Jerusalem astride a donkey and up to his arrest. Through several confrontations Jesus is led into a deeper awareness of what God desires of humankind, as well as that which he does not want. So He casts out the traders from the temple; he resists questions about his authority; He teaches in the temple and speaks of the end of days. He goes too far – and must be stopped. He needs to be brought to silence.

Those in charge think and begin to work towards a halt to these disturbances of the status quo, impacted as they are by injustice, social exclusion, exploitation: they must be stopped, and it won't stop there.

The tongue that has strengthened the weary through words of encouragement – that has reminded them of their own rights and their own self worth – must be stilled.

On the surface they have succeeded – yet in fact this tongue, this voice has been raised up anew.

One of the many symbols of this voice is in many places the altar – most of which, as here, are made from stone. A symbol of Jesus, who was silenced and yet who left an unceasing cry for the ages. A cry that even as he breathed his last called us to the unceasing love of God.

A call that fervently desires nothing more than that we shall not be silent as stone, but will answer, and raise up our voices and act as he does.

“If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” Can stones cry out?

Well, we can read what stone can do in the book of Habbakuk – albeit with regard to the perpetrators – in Chapter 2. It deals with those who exploit others:

- ⁹ “Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain,
setting his nest on high
to escape the clutches of ruin!
- ¹⁰ You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.
- ¹¹ The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.
- ¹² “Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed
and establishes a town by injustice!

Stone – nothing but stone – yet it cannot speak. Billions and billions of them are strewn across the Earth, silent witnesses to the age of the planet.

And yet: it is not merely customary in Judaism to lay a stone on a grave. This custom clearly developed for quite practical reasons – in order to prevent the larger, normally round central stone from rolling away or being dislodged and exposing the grave, smaller stones were laid.

Not only did they thus become symbols of death and of silence and mourning. As a part of Creation which is completely inanimate, they are themselves dead matter.

And yet through this custom they have become a symbol of life and hope, because they help us remember people who have lived.

On the site of the former concentration camp, talk of stones crying out has a

deeper meaning.

Indeed, if the stones here could talk, if the countless stones on the roll call square or those in the rectangles that mark where the barracks once stood could talk; if they could be a voice for the over 200,000 people who were abused, shamed, mistreated here – what would we need to hear?

If the thousands and thousands of stones on this site called to us, wept, cried out – all the pain, all the mourning, doubt and the fear of death that millions of people in the extermination camps suffered – who could bear it?

Yet it is not the stones that matter. They can be a reminder for us – a reminder of the many voices that have expressed themselves in accounts, diaries, files, interviews and stories shared and have spoken of the size of their fear and their pain, their loneliness and their suffering.

Yet despite everything so many have spoken too of hope, of closeness, of friendship, yes, even of the joy they felt there.

Again and again visitors to the concentration camp memorial site leave stones on the altar of the Agony of Christ Memorial Chapel. It is a gesture of mourning, of remembrance, but also a moment of hope – the hope that those who were crushed by this place will not be forgotten, that their pointless and cruel deaths will not be the final word, but a power beyond ours will restore justice and their worth to them.

Yes, in the end, along with all the mourning and pain, this place has also become a place of hope, indeed of joy. One might rejoice over the fact that the prisoners have regained their freedom, or over the fact that they are again regarded as people and not merely as numbers, more still that again their lives have regained their value.

Of course for most this joy will remain bound to memories of their own painful experiences and the loss of relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

Paul Hussarek, who was born in 1903 in the Moravian town of Aussee in what was then Czechoslovakia, named this in a long poem. He was a prisoner here from the 14th March 1941 to the liberation. At the end of his poem he writes:

The dead live... and their wondrous silence
rings out like distant violins
sings out, fills the world like thundering chorales
that tell of their deaths, and urge us
to bind the freedom we so desire
to the rights of man.

Those who cast the world into night and mist
who bear death and misery in their hands
are overcome. – Yet their victims, our dead,