

“Righteous Gentiles”

Observed 16 July

In the wake of the Second World War people had to come to terms with the horrific crimes committed under the leadership of Hitler and his fellow Nazis. At least twelve million people were murdered, six million because they were Jewish, the rest because they were Slavs or gypsies or gays or mentally or physically handicapped Within the Jewish community this wholesale intentional slaughter and intended genocide came to be referred to as the Holocaust, a biblical term which refers to the ‘whole burnt offering’ in the Temple, an offering which is offered to God and then completely consumed by fire. The death of all of these innocents seemed to be a similar destruction, which could be brought somehow within the relationship of God and the people of God. Responses to the Holocaust have at their heart a determination to survive. Not only do we all want to be sure that the genocide failed, that there will always be a Jewish people in the world. We also want to remember all those who were killed. Holocaust memorials and museums and databases have sprung up all over, filled with documents and pictures and artifacts, so that none of the slaughtered are forgotten.

As people reflected on the events of the Holocaust, they strove to understand the crimes that had been committed and the human situations that could let anyone participate in such atrocities. They brought criminals to justice. They also recognized and honored individuals who, though in no way personally connected to the Jewish religion or people, sacrificed their own safety to provide protection and rescue. These people have come to be referred to within the worldwide Jewish community as the ‘Righteous among the Gentiles’. At Yad Vashem, the principal Holocaust Museum in Israel, there is a grove of trees planted in honor of specific individuals who took extraordinary personal risks to save Jewish victims of the Holocaust. These righteous are remembered now whenever the dead are remembered and especially whenever the survivors are honored.

There are many wonderful stories of extraordinary courage, which can inspire all of us to live more selfless lives. Most of us have seen or read *Schindler’s List*, which recounts the remarkable exploits of Oskar Schindler, previously a self-indulgent, opportunistic business man, who saved hundreds of Jewish individuals by employing them in his factories and even personally rescuing them from death camps. Other famous individuals include Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who personally rescued many thousands of Jews from Hungary – and then was ‘disappeared’ himself by the Soviets; the pastors and people of the village of Le Chambon in France who sheltered and saved Jewish children from the Nazi occupiers of their country at great personal peril; and the Polish Roslan family who took in their Jewish neighbors’ children and hid them for the whole duration of the war even though they had not enough to feed themselves and their own children. These and countless others are great heroes, many of whom understood their duty to save and protect their neighbors because of the teachings of Jesus written in their own hearts. We all remember Hitler and his fellow criminals, but it is much more important to our spiritual lives to remember these quiet unassuming heroes who show us how to live as the humans we were created to be, in the image of Christ the Truly Human One.

Lessons Joshua 2:1-21; Psalm 11; Colossians 3:1-4; John 19:10-15

Collect God of the Covenant and Lord of the Exodus, by the hand of Moses you delivered your chosen people from cruel enslavement: We give you thanks for Raoul Wallenberg and all those Righteous Gentiles who with compassion, courage and resourcefulness rescued thousands of your children from certain death. Grant that, in the power of your Spirit, we may protect the innocent of every race and creed in the Name of Jesus Christ, strong Deliverer of us all; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.