

WALES AND ARMENIA

The transcript of the address given by
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at the Unveiling of the Memorial to the Victims of the Armenian
Genocide 1915
Temple of Peace, Cardiff, 3rd November 2007

The passages in italics were delivered in Welsh and have been translated

"It is a special privilege to be part of this historic occasion to pay tribute to those who suffered in the Armenian genocide during the First World War.

In Wales we are familiar with the idea of being air-brushed out of history. The old encyclopaedias used to have the advice 'for Wales, see England'. School text-books jump straight from the Romans to the Saxons, forgetting the native British, who became Welsh. Cultural historians ignore poets and novelists who wrote and write in Welsh. Church historians right as though Christianity first came to Britain with Augustine in 597, at a time when our glorious 'Age of Saints' in Wales was in fact drawing to a close.

That may be painful and irritating at times, but there is nothing in our experience that is as appalling as the genocide that systematically destroyed a million and a half Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War and the years immediately afterwards. And whatever historical air-brushing we have on occasion suffered from in Wales, it is quite trivial in comparison with the repeated denial of the Armenian genocide and the attempt to discount or relativize such unspeakable suffering.

One of our familiar sayings in Wales is 'Y Gwir yn erbyn y Byd' ('The Truth against the World'), and it's fitting and appropriate that our small nation stands side by side with our Armenian brothers and sisters to acknowledge the hideous suffering of the past and to deny the lies that seek to hide the uncomfortable truth of the genocide.

When we are faced with the statistics of genocide – with numbers of deaths running into six or seven figures – it's often easy for those of us who are outside the tragedy to forget its intense human dimension.

A memory comes back to me of a visit to the Genocide Memorial in Yerevan. What left an indelible impression on me there was the single skull of one of the martyrs of the genocide, brought back to Armenia from the sands of the Syrian desert where so many died in such agony. It was a reminder that each one of those who died was an individual – a precious person made in the image and likeness of God, with a family and loved ones and a potential for life that was brutally and cruelly snuffed out.

And another memory – of a party of schoolchildren, laughing and smiling on the steps of the Matenadaran, as they visited that wonderful shrine to Armenia's astonishingly rich culture. Seeing them, I thought, 'Children like these were those who were murdered, brutalized, enslaved, starved or orphaned during those horrendous years between 1915 and 1923.' Again I was reminded of the need for a respectful acknowledgment of all that pain.

The idea of 'parch' ('respect') is something else that is important to us in Wales: respect for those who deserve respect. And who is more worthy of respect than these sufferers who have been scorned and swept away by those who want to forget or deny the terrible reality of their suffering?

One of those small children spotted an ancient cross-stone by the entrance to the Matenadaran and shouted excitedly "Khatchkar! Khatchkar!" – and today we have unveiled and dedicated Wales' first khatchkar, with its Armenian cross that is such a powerful sign of suffering and hope.

In Wales we are used to our Celtic cross which is a symbol of the world made whole and redeemed through the sacrificial suffering of Christ. The Armenian cross also represents Christ's suffering and its four corners embrace the four corners of the world. In the version of it on many ancient khatchkars the branches of the Tree of Life grow from the cross – that tree whose leaves, the Bible tells us, are 'for the healing of the nations'. So the Armenian cross is not only a sign of the suffering of a Christian nation which has known more than any other what it is to be crucified with Christ. It is also a sign of hope for the future of all humanity.

So the khatchkar can teach us in Wales to rediscover the true meaning of our Celtic cross as a sign that offers hope to our world. It also reminds us of the way in which the Christian gospel has shaped the history and culture and identity of our two nations across the centuries.

The monastery of Geghard in the mountains of Armenia, with its extraordinary churches carved out of the living rock, is one of the most remarkable and powerful architectural and spiritual masterpieces in the world. And in one of those churches, right in the heart of the rock, there is a unique and very moving khatchkar. Instead of leafy branches growing out from the foot of the cross, there are two doves: signs of the Holy Spirit and of peace, recalling that dove which Noah released from the Ark.

They reminded me of the dove that I held between my hands outside the church of Saint Gayané in Holy Etchmiadzin, sensing its vulnerability and its beating heart. There is a tradition that goes back to the teaching of St. Grigor himself, and which seems to surface again and again in Armenian thought and writings, which describes the souls of the faithful departed, winging like doves towards heaven. And in his final article that courageous journalist Hrant Dink, murdered at the beginning of this year, wrote 'I feel like a dove'.

The dove is vulnerable – a reminder of the innocent defenceless martyred dead – and yet it also stands for freedom and hope. The dove which I released with a prayer on that Sunday morning outside Saint Gayané flew towards Mount Ararat – Masis.

Think for a moment how we Welsh people would feel if Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon), our special symbolic mountain, was controlled by foreigners and we were prevented from going there by watchtowers, high fences, minefields and armed soldiers. That is what it is like for the Armenians. They can see the beauty and wonder of Ararat – but they cannot get close to it.

My prayer today, remembering that dove and the beauty of the snows on Ararat shining in the sun, is that a time may come not only when the government of Turkey will admit the truth of the genocide of 1915, but also when Armenians will once again walk freely on that holy mountain Ararat, Masis – as a salve to help to heal a wound that has been open for far too long.

Patrick Thomas