

Andrew Turner, Deputy Mayor, Christchurch

United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2019

Ki ngā maunga, ki ngā waka, ki ngā karangatanga. Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

Good afternoon and welcome. I remember standing in this very spot two years ago on this day when this city held its first Holocaust commemoration. Since that time, the 27th of January has become an important anniversary in the city's calendar. On behalf of the city, my thanks go to the Hebrew community of Christchurch, the Holocaust Centre in Wellington, and the Christchurch World Peace Bell Association.

We are gathered here to remember the Shoah – the lives of six million people of the Jews who perished in the death camps of Europe. It was on this day, 75 years ago in 1945, that Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz. In 2005 the United Nations declared the 27th of January the International Remembrance Day to mark the genocide of the Jewish people, an abhorrence beyond our comprehension. A dark page in history, where state and governmental authority and force were used to systematically annihilate a people in a terrible act of brutality, coldness and savagery. We gather here to reflect upon those lives cut short, to remember their humanity, and to honour them all.

This was in our time, not in ancient history. A century has not passed and some of us here were born a few decades after the Second World War. The Holocaust is a crime without parallel in history, not just against the Jewish people but against all humanity, the humanity that binds us all.

When I attended the first commemoration, I spoke of our responsibility as individuals, as a community, as a city, to recognise evil and racism, bigotry and intolerance. To confront it, to call it by its name, and to challenge it. I also mentioned the need for us to be vigilant, to be watchful and, to never relax our guard.

Our geographic distance can result in a disconnectedness with the world, it is possible that the relative peace and safety we enjoy breeds in us an indifference, and that it might also insulate us from the shocks and horrors of the lives of those living in conflict or racial strife. We cannot wipe out hatred or prejudice from every mind but we do have a responsibility to try to do so. The seeds of hate are ever present and we must not allow fertile ground for it to thrive, or to take root.

Education is the key. By this I mean not what we teach in schools but how we educate by example and conduct, in the home, in the workplace and in public. This means taking a stand against bigotry in all its forms. To speak up, to act, as we are definitely not powerless. We have a choice, to defend our friends, our neighbours, and colleagues. We ourselves are not faced with the same risks today – we here in NZ do not risk imprisonment or violence at the hands of authorities, or have to look down the barrel of a gun. We can speak up, we can speak out and that is something we must do. We must make common cause with the outsider, the immigrant, the minority, the Jew, the Hindu, the Muslim. We must stand up, stand firm. Only then will we have truly learned the lesson of the Shoah, and have truly honoured those who perished.

It is important to tell and retell the story of the Holocaust as it helps us understand the nature of evil, and recognize the workings of wickedness in the tragedy that befell the Jewish people.

It is a reminder to us all to exercise vigilance in a world that is witnessing the rise of populism and totalitarianism, extremism and xenophobia, the dismantling of civil liberties and the oppression of minorities and migrants. Western societies and governments can now be included in the number of states that have recently adopted measures that are a grim reminder of the past. Anti-Semitism is on the rise again in the United States and Europe. Swastikas are being carried by neo-fascist youth in the streets and neo-Nazi rallies are no longer rare events. Some ultra-right wing governments have emboldened these expressions of hatred and migration has been the conveniently quoted cause for the economic downturn and unemployment in certain countries. It is therefore important to remind everyone the fate of the Jews of Europe, especially as the Holocaust moves to the edges of living memory. We meet not only to honour the memory of the dead, but to remind ourselves of the Holocaust as an event in history that has lessons for today, and lessons for the future. There are warnings that we must heed, signs that we must recognize, actions that we must take as communities and individuals, as teachers, parents, professionals, politicians, Mayors or councillors.

In the name of all those who died in the Holocaust, let us commit to preserving and honouring their memory by protecting the rights of religious, ethnic, migrant, or minority communities among us.

Let us commit to speaking for and on their behalf when they are unable or fear to do so, to protect their rights, to preserve their dignity and to demand the respect that is theirs. Let us commit today to confront and challenge prejudice, bigotry, hatred and racism in all its forms.

Thank you very much, and a good afternoon.

Nō reira Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa



Andrew Turner, Deputy Mayor, Christchurch, rings the Peace Bell