

The witnesses to life

Sermon at the Centennial Commemoration Service of the Armenian Genocide

The National Cathedral, Washington, DC, USA

7 May 2015

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary World Council of Churches

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, we read:

But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples.”

Vice President of the United States of America, Joseph Biden,

President of the Republic of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan,

Your Holinesses,

Catholicos Karekin II,

Catholicos Aram I,

Your Eminencies and Excellencies,

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

We commemorate today *the witnesses to life*. What they experienced and how they suffered made them witnesses to death; they became martyrs, witnesses of the truth. Tonight, we commemorate them not only as witnesses to cruel death, but also as *witnesses to life*. They gave witness to the dignity and

meaning of life before their death. Today, their testimonies call *us* to become witnesses to life in the midst of sin and death of our time.

We are gathered here in this National Cathedral. The United States of America has become a home for many who have needed shelter. We are gathered 100 years after the Armenian genocide, brutal and violent actions that caused the death of up to 1.5 million of the Armenian people in a short period of time. Many more lost their homes, their family members, their freedom, their future, some even were forced to denounce their faith.

We are here commemorating a tragedy and disaster that happened to our *one* humanity. The World Council of Churches with its 350 member churches and half a billion Christians in more than 110 countries, studied carefully and named this crime “genocide” in 1983. I had the privilege to represent these churches in the solemn and significant events in Armenia two weeks ago, in the Holy Etchmiadzin and at the national memorial site. I also participated in a forum of parliamentarians, experts in international law and politics and historians, whose statement was read on April 24 by a woman surviving the genocide in Rwanda in 1995. It expressed our shared commitment to address and name crimes against humanity for what they are and to do whatever we can to prevent such things as genocide from happening again. We have to admit that such appeals are needed also today.

The centennial since the start of the Armenian genocide now has passed. We should with these acts of commemorations also have passed the point when governments – including my own Norwegian government - discuss whether what happened to the Armenians in 1915 should be named as we do by our common moral sense: a genocide. Based on the witnesses to truth we should go into the future together – through acts of healing and reconciliation. (The

region where this happened desperately needs signs of justice and peace now.
We all do.)

We honour the martyrs of that genocide and of other genocides, as human beings, much more than only victims. Their lives are holy to God, their creator. Their dignity is not reduced but affirmed through their death in faithfulness and sacrifice. The Armenian people of today, together with these martyrs, are witnesses to the truth of human depravity and death. Even more, you are also witnesses to the life of your people and the power of God to create new life.

We are still in the season of Easter, reminded of the reality of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We celebrate the power of God of life overcoming the power of death. We have heard again the Easter Gospel, the good news. We do believe that death, sin, injustice, violence, war and crimes will not have the last word in this world.

In the Gospels, we learn how some witnessed the brutal death of their dear friend and master, becoming themselves victims of injustice as an outcome of human tactics and actions. In the Gospel of Easter morning, we hear how some of these women came to mourn and pay respect to the crucified one. They were shocked by the unexpected encounter with the power of life. These women got the unprecedented and significant task to be witnesses to both death and resurrection, called to not be afraid, but to move others also to be witnesses to life.

In my reading of stories about the Armenian genocide, I have been struck by the significant task of the women. Many of the witnesses that survived to tell what happened were women, many very young women. Many of those who brought the stories and the pictures of the genocide to the attention of the

world were also women. Some of them missionaries, and their names and pictures were displayed in the streets of Yerevan in the last weeks. The Armenian women often had to witness the torture, killings and death of their husbands and their children. They also had to suffer more by surviving, by knowing, remembering, waking up in the middle of nights from dreadful dreams, carrying not only the pain of death but also the pain of life being forced into marriages, through the loss of their community and Christian identity. Without them, we would know little of what happened. But they became not only witnesses to death, but also to the life of their people in the past and to the life to come, visible today in the lives of Armenians all over the world. We are deeply honoured to be with so many of you here tonight.

We live in a world that is facing new levels of brutality, crimes against humanity, systems of injustice, of poverty, of lack of ability and willingness to overcome conflicts through political and diplomatic processes. Every day, thousands are fleeing from their homes in Syria and Iraq, close to where so many Armenians lost their lives 100 years ago. The people of South Sudan are facing an ethnic war. Christian sisters and brothers in several countries are becoming martyrs, killed for being Christians. Their faithfulness and martyrdom unite us. People are suffering every day from unfinished or new conflicts in North and South Korea, Ukraine, Palestine and Israel, Nigeria – just to mention some of those contexts in which our member churches are struggling for a just peace. From my visits and encounters with people in these contexts, I am convinced that what the great majority really want, pray for and hope for, is justice and peace, irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity, race, faith or political parties. The same hopes for justice and peace we hear in this country, from cities like Ferguson and Baltimore. All lives matters! Everywhere

we can be inspired by the witnesses to life, who really work for life, not for death.

We are not speaking in a superficial way of the evil in this world or of death. We are not speaking in a superficial way of life. We are in the light of the resurrection, speaking the truth about both death and life.

The time has come for all of us to be much more than bystanders, observing the sin and cruelty in this world; but, together with these martyrs and saints to be ambassadors of justice and peace. At a time when also many countries in the world commemorate the 70 years after the end of World War II, let us together with all people of good will, of all races, beliefs or identities, explore and celebrate the deep meaning and richness of peace. Let us on this day commit ourselves to promote life and dignity of all, of those who were killed and those who survived, those who live today, and those to come after us – facing threats our generation put on their future, for example the effects of climate change.

Dear sisters and brothers, we are called to hope through the resurrection of Christ. We are called to not be afraid, not to be apocalyptic, crippled by cynicism or fatalism. We are called to be witnesses and ambassadors to life.

Amen.