

Kristallnacht

Why Christians Must Not Forget 9 November 1938

Kristallnacht is the name given to the night of 9 November 1938, when a Nazi-inspired violent rampage destroyed Jewish businesses, synagogues, sacred books and human lives. *Kristallnacht* is viewed as a critical step in the furthering of Nazi policy that led to the Shoah (Holocaust). Rabbi Dr Pesach Schindler, a Jewish child in Munich at the time, shared with me his memories of that night in these words:

“That night our synagogue went up in flames. Jews who were attempting to rescue Torah scrolls were kept away by the police. Fire fighters were on the scene. Their job was to make sure that the flames did not spread to Aryan property. On the morning of November 10th I remember seeing scores of Jewish shops burnt and plundered. While my brother and I were on the way to our classes the main streets were littered with glass, hence the name Kristallnacht [Night of Broken Glass].”¹

For most of my life as a Catholic the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* came and went unnoticed. It took its place in my consciousness as one of many human tragedies with no direct relevance to me personally. After all, I am not Jewish, I was born in a time and place remote from the terrible events of that night, and there has been plenty of human suffering in the world of the 20th and 21st centuries to occupy my mind and heart.

But these days the memory of *Kristallnacht* strikes a deep chord within me, and specifically as a Christian. Of course, every human suffering must be the concern of the Christian. Yet *Kristallnacht* has particular significance in that it involved the sufferings of our spiritual kin, linked as Christians are to the Jewish people by way of a biblical, spiritual umbilical cord which can never be completely severed.

Further, the Jewish people continue to this day to offer an irreplaceable witness to the name of God in

the world. God’s covenant with the Jewish people endures forever; it is “never revoked” (St John Paul II, Sinai, 2000). Looked at this way, when Nazism targeted the Jews on *Kristallnacht* paving the way to attempted genocide, it was also an attempt to eradicate the name of God in the world. And it attacked the deepest roots of the Church.

There is another reason why I remember *Kristallnacht*. Hitler’s rise to power occurred in a Europe that had been ‘Christianised’ for centuries. One of the cultural factors that allowed Nazi ideology to flourish was the prevalence of deeply entrenched anti-Jewish stereotypes portraying Jews as rejected by God for their failure to accept Jesus. Such prejudices had infiltrated Christianity and led to humiliations and violence towards Jews and whole Jewish communities. With this as its backdrop, the *Shoah* is not only a tragic chapter in the history for the Jewish people, it is a shameful chapter in Christian history.

Kristallnacht, then, speaks of an historic moment of diabolic contradiction: a moment when Christian culture unconsciously colluded with the attempted destruction of the Jewish people of whom Jesus was a son, of their covenantal relationship with God, and of the deepest memory of the Church. How can a Christian soul process the magnitude of this sin? ‘Do not be afraid’ is the repeated message of Scripture, summoning us to face our demons. That we must say ‘never again’ is plain. But memories fade and future generations will claim amnesia. By marking the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*—an annual pause to consider our responsibility to resist evil—Christians can offer a reparatory healing witness for generations to come.

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¹ Dr Rabbi Pesach Schindler, ‘A Jewish Child Growing Up in Nazi Germany,’ on record at Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, Israel.