

‘The Unnamed Crime’

The word genocide had not yet been invented. It did not come into existence until 1943. The term ‘the unnamed crime’ was used instead by Winston Churchill when he sought to describe what the governments of Great Britain, France and Russia called a crime against humanity and civilisation. Now the catastrophe that fell upon the Armenian peoples during the course of the First World War and its immediate aftermath at the hands of Ottoman and Turkish forces is called ‘the Armenian Genocide’.

The Armenian Genocide

The Armenians were a vulnerable people in the late Ottoman Empire. They were a Christian minority always liable to discrimination and persecution. The last quarter of the nineteenth century had seen them subject to harsh reprisals. The outbreak of the First World War placed them in an invidious position. Some Armenians lived in Russia (at war with the Ottomans) and those inside Anatolia (in Turkiye) as well as other parts of the empire (for example, in Syria) were Christian. They were subject to ethnic cleansing, mass deportations, and horrific marches across the country where many died through illness and violent acts.

The Humanitarian Crisis

Even in the 1890s the plight of the Armenians aroused deep seated humanitarian concern in Europe, the United States and also Australia. Reports of the ‘unnamed crime’ leaked out from newspaper articles (including those of the noted war-time correspondent, Charles Bean). American missionaries and Anzac soldiers and (in due course) prisoners of war. Back in Australia the churches combined with other agencies to manage popular support for the provision and despatch of foodstuffs and medical assistance by way of a ship of mercy (*Hobson’s Bay*). The crisis attracted the compassionate service of many Australian women among whom were those like Jessie Webb who would organize the Armenian Relief Fund, Australia’s first international human aid effort.

The churches combined for the sake of an Armenian Sunday (as early as 1917) to remember their fellow Christians and raise funds. The most notable of initiatives taken was the setting up of the Australasian orphanage at Antilyas, north of Beirut, which cared for 1700 Armenian children.

The Revd. James Edwin Cresswell

There were a number of church men and women from the denominations that would eventually come into union in the Uniting Church who were active in the relief campaigns.

One of those was James Edwin Cresswell, a Congregational minister from Adelaide. Cresswell had been a passionate supporter of the relief fund in South Australia. He was asked to make a tour of the Near East in 1923 to report on conditions. The Commonwealth Government had already rejected his plea for the secure passage of a number of Armenian children to migrate to Australia. He wrote of scenes 'beyond words'. He was able to see the effect of Australian aid on the children in the Antilyas orphanage.

A Chain of Mercy

The International Commissioner for the Near East Relief Fund was the American Congregational minister, the Revd. Lincoln D. Wirt. In 1922 he came to Australia and, for a period of time, he served in churches in Sydney and Brisbane. It was Wirtt who stimulated the churches and the wider public to work for a 'chain of mercy'

The Uniting Church and the Armenian Genocide

Back in 2015 the full Assembly of the Uniting Church resolved to 'affirm the value of recognizing a date on or near the anniversary of the Armenian genocide as a day of observance and commemoration'. The date usually set aside for such observance is 24 April.

This act of commemoration is a moment of ecumenical recognition. It honours the Armenian Christians whose country became Christian in 301, the first state in the world where the Cristian faith would be the official religion.

It is also a recognition of the Armenian congregation (at Willoughby) and ministers who serve and worship within the Uniting Church. It reminds us of the role played by ministers and members of all three denominations that came into the Uniting Church.

It is, most of all, a solemn recognition of the 'unnamed crime' committed against the Armenian peoples before the word 'genocide' was invented and more freely used.

It is a reminder not to forget the past. The plight of the Armenian peoples continue today in their struggle with their Azeri neighbours.

Recovering Memory in Prayer

The following prayer was offered by Rev Charissa Suli, President of the National Assembly, following a showing of the film, 'The Golden Chain of Mercy'.

Heavenly Father,
We come before You tonight
with hearts full of gratitude

for the stories of mercy, love, and courage
shared in The Golden Chain of Mercy.

We thank You for the lives of those
who stood as beacons of hope
during the Armenian Genocide,
for the ANZAC soldiers and missionaries
who extended hands of compassion
to the suffering,
and for all who have carried this legacy forward.

Lord,
we ask Your blessing upon the Armenian people,

Amen.

The Armenian Martyrs' Day Prayer”

Our loving and gracious Heavenly Father,
for all those who stood firm in their Christian faith
in the face of persecution, exile and death.

We praise You, O God.

For all who endured the genocide,

We praise You, O God.

For all those Armenian men, women and children
who were deported, driven in death marches,
and massacred mercilessly
because they refused to deny Christ,

We lift up our cries to You, O God.

For all those who directly or indirectly participated
in the murder of this small Christian nation
and washed their hands saying,

“I am innocent of their blood,”

We lift our cries to You, O God.

For all those who continue to trample on truth,
justice and human rights,
We lift our cries to You, O God.

That this nation may not perish
but prosper under Your fatherly care,
We pray to You, O God.

That You may uproot from our hearts
every trace of hatred and the spirit of vengeance.
We pray to You, O God.

That those of us who are the descendants
of those noble martyrs
may have a deep sense of gratitude
and a deep sense of responsibility.
We pray to You, O God.

That we may recognize they died for their faith
that we might live for it,
We pray to You, O God.

Grant that we may value
the freedom and the security
we are privileged to enjoy in this beautiful country.
Hear our prayer, O God.

Grant that Your power of resurrection
may inspire us to live as a righteous people
prepared for every good work,
Hear our prayer, O God.

Grant that we may be a compassionate,
forgiving and loving people.

Hear our prayer, O God, and grant us a right spirit.

Amen!

In a number of ways this initiative taken by the Assembly was highly significant. There is an iconic relevance to the place of the Armenian nation in the unfolding tradition of the Christian faith. It is so especially at a time when the regions of the Middle East and the Caucasus are in such turmoil and many lives continue to be lost.

In 301 (a long time ago now) Armenia became the first Christian nation in the world.

The Turkish government of those days oversaw the wholesale killing of able-bodied males and the deportation of women, children, the elderly and the infirm on death marches leading into the Syrian desert. It is estimated that 1.5 million people died and a further 1 million people were displaced.

In our Synod we have an Arminian congregation at Willoughby and a couple of Armenian ministers in service. They are testimony to the resilience and the possibility of new life in diaspora.

Those resolutions of the Assembly have rarely been observed. And yet this initiative – along with one seeking to commend to the state government that it should acknowledge the genocide and encourage the federal government to do so led the Uniting Church to be awarded a Freedom Award bestowed by the Armenian National Committee of Australia.

In order to honour those Assembly resolutions, we are providing you with a prayer and a hymn for the occasion. Your support and solidarity in continuing times of difficulty is appreciated.

Our current observance of the original Armenian Genocide is happening at a time of further ethnic cleansing. Last September 120,000 Armenians were forced to leave their homes in the ancestral lands of Artsakh following ten months of a blockade enforced by neighbouring Azerbaijan. They have become the latest waves of refugees.

Armenian Martyrs' Day Prayer

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