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Dear Friends,

*...I have to go, my darling"...  
.I promise, I will see you again someday.  
We'll be free....I have to leave you for a little while*

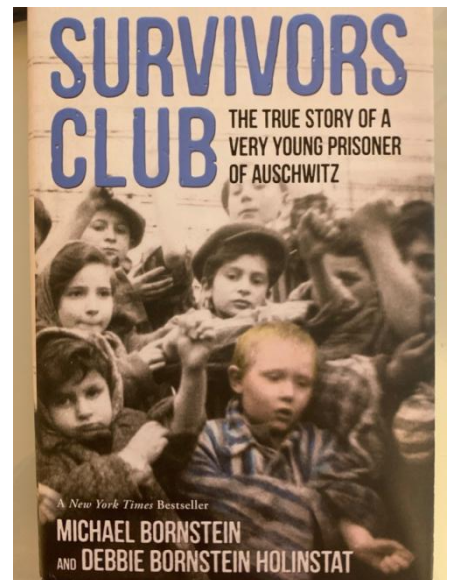
It has been one hell of a week...in every sense. On 5<sup>th</sup> February, I began a week at home away from my desk to recharge my batteries: ministry during the pandemic lockdowns has been totally exhausting. On 6<sup>th</sup> February I celebrated, and perhaps even mourned a little, my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, but with huge thanks to all of you who sent wonderful cards and gifts. The planned family Zoom at 7pm along with a distanced curry did not happen as Esme delivered a litter of very tiny babies between 7 and 10pm that night!



On 7<sup>th</sup> February another long awaited family Zoom took place between my wider family of first, second and third cousins who are now spread all around the world. For each one of us who saw the other, perhaps for the first time, we carried a host of emotions; sadness, joy survivor guilt, confusion, hope. Words really cannot describe our meeting. Let me try to explain.

I was born a Jonas. My father's family, having fled the pogroms in Poland when he was an infant, was really a Yonisch or Jonisch. Through my childhood I knew I had cousins and second cousins who had not survived either at the turn of the twentieth century or subsequently during the holocaust. In my teens I travelled with my parents to New York and unknowingly met a survivor. But the sadness and the tragedy always went unspoken both in my own family and in that of my cousins. Yet Covid has changed this and I will be forever changed.

Long ago, when father's family escaped to Belgium and then journeyed to England where they were granted asylum and were "naturalised" as British citizens, my grandfather's brothers (for reasons we do not know) chose to remain in Poland. My cousins and I did not know of the existence of these brothers. I am sure my father knew some of the story but was unable to articulate his loss and it seems this was true for his sister and brothers for their children like me have spent the first 60 or 70 years of our lives blissfully unaware that we are the lucky ones. The full truth was only revealed because my cousin Lynn took up genealogy, tracing our family tree during lockdown. Last week as he held up his tattooed arm on Zoom we looked into the eyes of Michael Bornstein our cousin for the first time. Michael is one of only 52 children under eight who survived. He tells his heart-breaking story in, "Survivors Club, the true story of a very young prisoner of Auschwitz"



Since last Sunday I have tried and failed to process some of what I now know. It will be hard not to think about this as we move towards Lent. We are days from Ash Wednesday – when, even if we don't roll around in sackcloth and ashes as our forebears did when they entered into a time of mourning, we are likely to reflect on our lives and perhaps even ponder the ways in which we've been led astray, hurt others, misused the power we have – just to mention a few of our shortcomings.

On Ash Wednesday we will gather, if we can, on Zoom for a service at 6pm. If you have a palm cross left from a previous year do put it (or a piece of newspaper or card) in an old baked bean tin and burn it. Please have it with you on the night. We will each mark ourselves as a sign of our own frailty and mortality. If you don't use Zoom, perhaps you will just do this at home on Ash Wednesday. Please also

take a moment and go out into your garden or for a walk and gather a stone - any old stone, a dirty stone, a clean stone, a big stone, a small stone, a smooth stone or a jagged stone. Any stone will do. I won't ask you to throw it as Jesus did when a woman was caught in the act of adultery. You will remember the baying crowd and Jesus' invitation to those religious hypocrites when he invited those without sin to hurl a stone at her. Oh yes, we too are fallen people and must let go of our ammunition and walk away empty handed. But our stones will be reminders through the hard but lifegiving season of Lent to think more deeply about ourselves. Why is that some who have been abused turn into abusers? Why is that some who have been harmed make it their life's calling to make peace with others.

On a mountain top, Peter, James and John see Jesus in a new light; he is transfigured before their eyes. Only moments before he had told them that he must suffer and die. They were unwilling to accept this but now they see him changed before them as in a flash of revelation. They see him alongside Elijah and Moses, the prophet and the lawgiver. And they hear the voice that spoke at His baptism, but now the voice is not just telling them that "This is my Son, the Beloved" but asking them pointedly to "listen to him!" Have we understood? Have we listened to Him? To walk in the footsteps of Jesus is to suffer for others NOT to be made to suffer by others. To walk in the footsteps of Jesus is not to hurl stones at others who are unlike us or don't conform to our norms but to travel gently with them. To sprinkle ash on our own foreheads is to remind ourselves of our own mortality, hypocrisy and shortcomings so that in the time that is left to us we will work to bring God's own Shalom to earth.

In his book, my cousin Michael recounts how the stench of burning flesh from those dreadful gas ovens filled his nostrils when he was but a tiny child. He speaks of the ash dust that covered the ground. Whilst I might not erase these images from my heart and mind as long as I live, for this is my story, I invite you to come with me on a journey to know yourself and the God who even in his darkest moment chose a path of nonviolence.

On the mountain top when Peter, James and John see Jesus in a new light they are terrified. Why? When the tomb is empty, Mark, the gospel writer, tells us his friends are terrified. Why? When Elijah prepares his successor Elisha for his death, Elisha requests a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Why? Surely it is because Elisha is asking that he walk in the footsteps of the prophet, his father in faith. Surely Peter, James and John are scared because in that mountain top moment of revelation and again at the empty tomb they realise they too must lay aside selfish ambition and walk in those steps of peace-making that lead to life. And perhaps we are scared too because deep down we know what we are called to do.

May I wish you a Holy Lent

**Shalom,  
Vicki  
Xx**

