



Friday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020 - Community Assembly

## *Meaning*



In his inspiring book, 'Man's Search for Meaning', Viktor Frankl documented the transformative power of looking beyond yourself. Frankl was a psychotherapist in Vienna before the Second World War. His experiences in Auschwitz led him to a realisation that the most significant thing he could do was to maintain his will to live and help others do so. His prisoner experiences reinforced what was already one of his main ideas - life is primarily a quest for meaning. Frankl identified three possible sources for meaning: in work, doing something significant; in love, caring for another person; and in courage, during difficult times.

Frankl chose to take control of the extraordinary situation he was forced into. The Nazis did everything in their power to dehumanise him and other camp prisoners. Possessions were stolen. Heads were shaved. Names were replaced with numbers. Unspeakable brutality reigned. And yet, Frankl decided that for all the freedoms that he was denied, there was one freedom that they could not take from him: the freedom how to respond.

His first decision was to not allow the Nazis to define him. He did not see himself as a victim. He did not see himself as racially inferior. He saw himself as a scientist. He saw himself as a psychotherapist. By so doing, he retained his sense of freedom - his first victory over the murderers.

Frankl's next decision was to look beyond himself to the plight of others, who seemed to be losing the will to live. He would listen to their stories, particularly about who they were before the war. He then tried to specify what was waiting for them, and what could only be realised if they stayed alive to fulfil. The second victory.

For Frankl, this was a form of healing based on a person's search for meaning. The essential heart of this was a call from outside the self. As he later put it: we should not ask ourselves what we want from life - we should ask ourselves, what does life want from us.

As we plan for and prepare to emerge, eventually, from the extraordinary experiences we have all lived through during this public health emergency, we might all draw some strength, and so comfort, from Frankl's enduring insight: forces beyond your control can take things away from you, except one thing - your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation.

Best wishes to you all - take care.

*Mr Lawlor*