Standing in the middle of what remains of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp on the northern outskirts of Berlin, as I did some years ago, I found myself sympathising with those who keep their heads down. During the Nazi period Sachsenhausen held political dissidents and prisoners-of-war, tens of thousands of whom perished. But as I looked over to the neat suburban bungalows that lined the street leading up to the camp’s front gate, I thought to myself, “Suppose I had lived over there, and suppose the dreadful reality of what was happening in here had begun to press itself upon me, what, exactly, would I have done? What, exactly, could I have done? And what, exactly, could I have done that would have made any difference?” The answer: probably nothing. And so I understood why so many, there and then, decided to draw the curtains and turn away. After all, they had families to take care of, jobs to hold on to, and lives not to waste on futile heroics.

The territory here is morally grey. The lines between prudence and cowardice, valour and recklessness, are not clear. Sometimes, discretion really is the better part of valour. And yet, somewhere there is a bottom-line, on the far side of which valour becomes the better part of discretion. So, while we may sympathise with those who avert their eyes, keep their heads down, and go with the flow, we cannot but admire—and be challenged by—those who don’t.

And in Nazi Germany some didn’t. One of the most moving sites in Berlin is the Memorial Museum to the German Resistance on Stauffenbergstrasse, which comprises a dozen or so rooms, each devoted to a different group of active dissidents—here church groups, there the trade unions; here youth organisations, there student groups; here the military officers, there the communists—and in each room, the walls covered in photographs, snapshots of men and women, adults and adolescents, most of them perfectly ordinary.

But one dissident, who came at least within a stone’s throw of this cathedral, was not so ordinary. Helmuth James von Moltke was a great nephew of Bismarck’s greatest general,
and an aristocrat, albeit a socialist one. Since his mother was a South African Scot—hence his second name ‘James’—he had connections with Britain, and in the mid-1930s he considered removing his family here. To that end he spent several periods in London preparing for the English bar, during which he made regular forays to Oxford. Indeed, when, in Oriel College’s Senior Common Room in the mid-1990s, I started talking about my new-found interest in von Moltke to a long-retired don, he stopped me and, pointing at the fireplace, said, “I’m sure I remember him standing just over there”.

Although von Moltke knew many of those involved in the plot to kill Hitler in July 1944, he wasn’t among them. He believed that Germany’s salvation required much more than a coup d’état by conservative soldiers; it needed unambiguous, catastrophic defeat to clear the way for radical reconstruction—a very, very terrible thing for a patriot to have to will. To that end, he hosted a series of religiously and politically ecumenical meetings on his estate at Kreisau—then in Silesia, now in south-west Poland—to plan for the rebuilding of his country after the fall of the regime.

One of his several impressive features is the acute guilt he felt over his own passivity. In October 1941 he wrote from Berlin to his wife, Freya, as follows:

A woman known to a friend of mine saw a Jew collapse on the street: when she wanted to help him up, a policeman stepped in, stopped, and kicked the body on the ground so that it rolled into the gutter: then he turned to the lady with a vestige of shame and said: “Those are our orders”. How can anyone know these things and still walk around free? With what right? Is it not inevitable that his turn will come too one day, and that he too will be rolled into the gutter? If only I could get rid of the terrible feeling that I have let myself be corrupted, that I do not react keenly enough to such things, that they torment me without producing a spontaneous reaction. I have mistrained myself, for in such things, too, I react with my head. I think about a possible reaction instead of acting.

When to act, and when not to? When to hold back, and when to stand out? When is prudence not cowardly, and courage not foolish? To his great credit, von Moltke didn’t let his feeling of impotence dull his conscience. He didn’t relieve the tension by drawing the curtains and turning away. He allowed his conscience to go on tormenting him.

As a consequence, it did propel him to take risks and to step out alone. On 7th March 1940 he described a fraught day at the office in the Department of Military Intelligence:

There was a big row [about the treatment of prisoners-of-war] …. Once more I was defeated on a decisive question. When the meeting was over, I asked permission to
exercise the right of every official to have his dissenting opinion put on record. Big row: I was an officer, I was told, and had no such right but simply the duty to obey. I said I was sorry, but this was a question of responsibility before history, which to me had priority over the duty to obey. The matter came before the admiral, and after five minutes he endorsed my opinion. He obviously had shared it all along, at any rate had wavered, and my resistance had strengthened his courage. Result: the admiral [Canaris] will have his personal dissent recorded in the minutes and will also speak to these minutes before Hitler.iii

On this occasion, as it turned out, his protest was effective: it stiffened the courage of his boss, who relayed it to Hitler. Overall, however, von Moltke was ineffective. In the vengeful aftermath of the assassination plot, which we commemorate this evening, he was arrested and in January 1945, tried and hanged at the age of thirty-eight, leaving behind him a wife and two young children. His brave efforts didn’t stop the murderous onward march of the regime, any more than did the efforts of Hans and Sophie Scholl, the July ’44 complotters, or any of the other dissidents poignantly displayed on the walls of the Berlin museum. The Nazi juggernaut crushed them all, and proceeded on its way.

But von Moltke understood this. And that’s a third of his impressive features—not only his persistently troubled conscience, not only his courage in standing out alone, but his appreciation of the value of doing what’s right, even though the prospect of success is almost negligible. As he wrote in October 1941:

At four o’clock I woke up and thought about Kreisau, my family, and the war. I became aware of a change that has taken place in me during the war, which I can only ascribe to a deeper insight into Christian principles. I don’t think that I feel the suffering of mankind less than before, and yet I find it easier to bear: it is less of an impediment to me than before. The realization that what I do is senseless does not stop my doing it, because I am much more firmly convinced than before that only what is done in the full recognition of the senselessness of all action makes any sense at all.iv

“Only what is done in the full recognition of the senselessness of all action makes any sense at all”. The remark is cryptic, but the meaning it struggles to express, I think, is this: that the significance of what we do doesn’t lie so much in its effectiveness—in what it effects or brings about or achieves—as in what it says, in what it points to.

This abstract point takes on flesh in the final letter that von Moltke wrote to his wife just after the trial in which he been condemned to death and a few days before his execution.
Here he speaks of how he now sees, with wonderment, the whole of his life as a journey of preparation, bringing him to a place where he can affirm, clearly and unequivocally, not just with words but in his very person, what is true and just and of enduring value:

    Just think how wonderfully God prepared this, his unworthy vessel. At the very moment when there was danger that I might be drawn into the plot to kill Hitler, I was taken away, so that I should be and remain free from all connection with the use of violence. Then he planted in me my socialist leanings, which freed me, as a big landowner, from all suspicion of representing interests... And then your husband is chosen, as a Protestant, to be above all attacked and condemned for his friendship with Catholics, and therefore he stands before Freisler [the rabidly Nazi judge] not as a Protestant, not as a big landowner, not as a nobleman, not as a Prussian, not as a German but as a Christian and nothing else. “The fig leaf is off”, says Herr Freisler. Yes, every other category was removed.

Von Moltke’s trial was a revelation to him, for in it he discovered the meaning of his life, which lay not in what it had produced or built, so much as what it enabled him to say—in its witness. In that moment his life was disclosed as a long and subtle process of preparing him to be in a position to give a clear and utterly unambiguous answer to Freisler’s questions. This is why, in spite of the fact that he was about to die violently and unjustly at the hands of a triumphant tyranny, he was able to conclude his last letter thus:

    My life is finished and I can say of myself: He died in the fullness of years and of life’s experience. The task for which God made me is done. I end by saying to you by virtue of the treasure that spoke from me and filled this humble earthen vessel:
    The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
    and the love of God
    and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
    be with you all.
    Amen.\(^v\)

\(^1\) Die Gedenkstätte deutscher Widerstand, 13-14 Stauffenbergstrasse, Berlin.
\(^iii\) Ibid., p. 60.
\(^iv\) Ibid., p. 170.
\(^v\) Ibid., pp. 410-11, 408-9.