

## HOMILY LENT 3 2021

1940. Europe was ablaze and here the Battle of Britain was well underway. Then, on the night of November 14<sup>th</sup> / 15<sup>th</sup> it seemed that hell itself visited the city of Coventry. This an account of what happened, written as if it were a contemporary report, which draws on archive media, newspapers, eye-witness accounts and reference books:

*The German Luftwaffe has bombed Coventry in a massive raid which lasted more than 10 hours and left much of the city devastated. Relays of enemy aircraft dropped bombs indiscriminately. One of the many buildings hit included the 14th century cathedral, which was all but destroyed. An eye-witness described the scene, saying:*

*“The whole city was ringed with leaping flames, bathed in brilliant moonlight and a few searchlights were sweeping the smoke-filled sky.”*

*Initial reports suggest the number of casualties is about 1,000. Intensive anti-aircraft fire kept the raiders at a great height from which accurate bombing was impossible. Reports say 4,330 homes were destroyed and three-quarters of the city's factories damaged. Other targets included two hospitals, two churches, hotels, clubs, cinemas, public-shelters, public swimming baths, a police station and a post office.*

*According to one report, some 500 enemy aircraft took part in the raid. Wave upon wave of bombers scattered their lethal payloads over the city. The night sky, already lit by a brilliant moon, was further illuminated by flares and incendiary bombs. The German High Command has issued a communiqué describing the attack on Coventry as a reprisal for the British attack on Munich - the birthplace of the Nazi party. The message continued: "Particularly heavy was the attack on Coventry, where numerous engine works and aero accessory factories as well as other targets of military importance were attacked with bombs of heaviest calibre, causing extensive damage." The German Official News Agency described the raid on Coventry as "the most severe in the whole history of the war".*

*The bombing began at 1920 and did not cease until dawn. The all-clear was finally sounded at 0615 GMT. The city's tram system was destroyed. Nearly all gas and water pipes were smashed and people have been advised to boil emergency supplies of water.*

*The cathedral Provost, the Very Reverend Dick Howard and a party of helpers attempted to deal with 12 incendiary bombs by smothering them with sand. But another shower of incendiaries accompanied by high explosives forced them to give up their efforts. Mr Howard said: "The cathedral will rise again, will be rebuilt, and it will be as great a pride to future generations as it has been to generations of the past."*

The beloved mediaeval Cathedral was bombed to destruction that night. The morning after, Jock Forbes, a stonemason and caretaker of the grounds walked into the ruins with Provost Dick Howard, and finding two fallen charred beams, the two men fashioned them together into the form of a cross. Only hours after the bombing had ended a commitment was made not to pursue revenge, but to seek reconciliation. On Christmas day, just a few weeks later, Provost Howard preached a sermon that was broadcast across the Empire on the BBC. In it, he said that his vision, once the war was over, was to work with those who had been enemies 'to build a kinder, more Christ-like world'.

As a tangible reminder of this resolve, he had the words 'Father forgive' inscribed on the wall of the ruined cathedral. They are still to be seen today behind the altar built from fallen stone. 'Father forgive'. Words which echo those spoken by Jesus as he hung on the cross. But do you notice the slight but hugely significant difference?

Jesus, sinless, innocent, bearing the wrongs of the whole world, prayed 'Father forgive them...' Provost Howard chose the words 'Father forgive', recognising that we as well as our enemies need God's forgiveness.

Alongside those words and the cross of charred timbers, three twisted medieval nails, which fell to the floor as the wooden roof timbers burned away were taken up and fastened together into the form of a cross – the cross of nails. This became the symbol of a unique ministry. A ministry of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation which has been the heartbeat of the life of the new Cathedral of Coventry ever since.

18 years after the cross of burnt timber was erected Canon Joseph Poole wrote a Litany of Reconciliation, a confession of humanity's joint failings. You'll find the simple words in the prayer practice sheet for this week, along with images from Coventry. The litany ends with words of exhortation from Paul's letter to the Christians at Ephesus:

'Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.'

This litany is prayed by the community of Coventry Cathedral each day at noon. On Fridays it is prayed in the ruins of the old Cathedral, which remain hallowed ground. All around the world many other associated centres of reconciliation join in using this Litany of Reconciliation each Friday at noon local time. The sign of this international community is that cross of nails. Our present Archbishop of Canterbury wears one as his episcopal cross. You may wish to join with people of Coventry Cathedral and around the world in praying the litany this Friday, or any future Friday at noon. The words are in the accompanying Lenten Prayer Practice sheet for this week.

It's an inspiring approach. It speaks of reconciliation but recognises that this is serious stuff. We should note that forgiveness is not about sweeping hurt or harm under the carpet. Instead it is about surfacing hurt and harm and addressing it, taking it extremely seriously indeed. Forgiveness is neither to be offered or received lightly but with careful thought and responsibility. Genuine contrition usually involves change. Justice and forgiveness are intertwined. Forgiveness frees the person who forgives as much as the person being forgiven. There is much more that can be said and explored and one resource which might be of interest is The Forgiveness Project who describe forgiveness between people as a 'complex, messy and gripping' subject. You can find out more here: <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/>

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas, have suggested that in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew Jesus gives the disciples instructions for being a community – a community which Jesus knows will experience conflict and which will need to learn to challenge, to forgive and to be reconciled with one another. The question is not whether such a conflict can be eliminated from the community but how his followers deal with sin, hurt and conflict amongst themselves when they arise. Jesus seems to assume that such disputes are not to be ignored but brought into the open. Some key aspects of this approach include:

- The process is designed for dealing with a *significant* grievance, not trivia
- The goal of the process is reconciliation, not blame, revenge or punishment
- The first step is a direct approach, to the persons involved and in doing so to speak and listen, not to threaten.
- Other people are only brought in if the initial approach is unsuccessful
- The aim of the final stage is winning back, not excommunication.

Peter's question is striking. He presupposes that he is the one in a dispute who has been sinned against and who assumes a position of moral power against the one who has wronged him. Peter needs to be reminded that he has been forgiven himself. To be a reconciler, to justly confront another, to speaking the truth in love, we do well to remember that we first have been forgiven and that we belong to a community of the forgiven which stands as an astonishing place of hope in our world.

Peter also starts from the position of understanding forgiveness as an occasional act. Jesus sees it as a way of life. Jesus asks us to reflect on what motivates our behaviour and attitudes towards others, especially perhaps in terms of conflict. It's a wonderful liberation but truthfully it can be exceptionally hard and costly. Afterall it was from the cross that those words 'Father, forgive them' were spoken.