

Interview with Canon Mary Gregory, 29 January 2025 prior to her becoming Bishop of Reading

What is the role of Coventry in reconciliation?

One of the things I think about a lot – and maybe I'll say more later - is about the role of story in reconciliation and I think that Coventry has such a compelling story. It speaks of the devastation of conflict but then it also has another chapter about what can flow from that: rebuilding, creating something beautiful out of something awful and the possibility of former enemies reconciling and becoming friends. So at Coventry we don't just talk about theory, we can tell our story, our Cathedral story, our city stories in ways that people can connect with and crucially I think it has an element of hope in that story. So often conflict situations feel completely intractable; people don't have any sense that things can be different. Well here, in stone and wood and glass you can see that things can be different so it's a place of honesty and it's a place of hope.

How relevant in WW2 in Coventry's reconciliation work today?

I think it's a really interesting question. I think that our World War II story is certainly foundational to us - it's made us who we are as a site, ruins and a new cathedral. Provost Howard, who was the leader of the cathedral in the second world war, set us on our particular course of Reconciliation Ministry so it's an important story, it's a foundational story, but as with any other foundation I think it's really important that we continue to build on it and particularly for younger generations that feels like history - ancient history even - and so we have to continually, I think, retell the story in today's language using examples from today's culture and society. We'll never lose our foundation but just as Basil Spence built a new building, that's what we're called to do - to tell new stories.

What role does religion play in reconciliation?

Maybe the place to start is by just acknowledging the role that religion plays in conflict. So many of the world's conflicts throughout history and today are often in some ways connected to religion, to the beliefs that people hold and when they try to hold them to the exclusion of all other beliefs. I don't think we're just the amazing angelic peacemakers who waded into conflict to make everything better, I think we have to acknowledge the part that religion plays in the triggering and the perpetuating of those conflicts. That's why Coventry's Litany, its prayer has such a strong start because it begins, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" or to use language without so much faith, not so much freighted by faith, we all contribute to conflict and to disagreement, even in our friendships, in our families. People of faith are just the same, so we have to own the part of religion in conflict but then absolutely religion has a role to play in reconciliation. The great story of faith, of many faiths, is about human beings being reconciled to a Divine Being, to God and that experience of being brought to a point of peace with a Divine Being shows us how rich this is, how important the difference that can make to us and therefore how important reconciliation might be amongst human beings. To use that word again, religion often gives us a kind of a framing story for the work that we do and religion often speaks about the value of forgiveness, how that is something right at the heart of well-being for human beings and, of course, forgiveness and reconciliation are related although in complicated ways they're not exactly the same.

Is the role of reconciliation unique to Christianity?

No! Short answer. Longer answer - one of the joys for me of working in Coventry has been for the first time in my ministry to work in a multicultural situation with lot of other faiths and so I've worked really closely with Muslim sisters and brothers and Sikh sisters and brothers in particular and they both inspire me and challenge me about my own reconciliation practice in the ways in which they live out their faiths. The Sikh Community for example - people will know this - have this amazing ministry of hospitality and welcome where they'll feed anybody who comes to them and where every night of the week just up the road from the cathedral they're there with their van serving meals to people who live on the streets. That's a real work of reconciliation in as much as it's noticing another and working to meet their needs. That's a pretty good start for the work of reconciliation, noticing another and seeking to meet their needs. Then our Muslim sisters and brothers have been so completely

impressive in the ways in which they've responded to the Southport murders which happened in 2024 and triggered a lot of racial tension, a lot of really unpleasant awful far-right activism. The Muslim Community in this city wanted to work with people of every other faith in saying the shared values that we have about living together with one another, about hospitality, about forgiveness, about building a better world. That was a long answer to the question, is reconciliation unique for Christians? No, absolutely not. I think that people of no faith as well see the imperative and the importance of it.

What's your definition of reconciliation?

My definition of reconciliation is a definition that speaks to the "how" of reconciliation; how might this happen. So my definition is, reconciliation is born of rich storytelling and courageous listening. Just to unpack that a little bit, rich storytelling for me is storytelling that isn't just edited highlights where we just tell the best bits that would put us in the best possible light. Rich storytelling is putting across some of the contradictions in our stories and definitely not shying away from those moments when we are the villain as well as the hero. When we tell stories about ourselves it's very often that we're the heroine of the story but, actually, rich storytelling will acknowledge those parts where we went wrong. And then courageous listening: we've all been in conversations where someone's speaking and we're just sitting there waiting to make our clever rebuttal, but courageous listening is listening with our minds, our hearts and our bodies as well and listening in such a way that we're prepared to be changed. So reconciliation is born of rich storytelling and courageous listening.

Why is storytelling significant in reconciliation?

There are four ways really and it's about how stories work and connect with us.

The first thing is that storytelling grows understanding, it moves it beyond theory to somebody's lived experience and I think that grows understanding in us of their situation.

Secondly, I think storytelling engages our emotions. In 2024, I saw a beautiful vase in an exhibition called "Remembering Atefeh" and it's by an artist called Claudia Clair. I'll try and describe it. It's a beautiful vase which Claudia Clair made with a picture inside, a photograph of Atefeh. Atefeh was a young woman in Iran who was forced into prostitution by a group of men and then was stoned to death for being a prostitute by another group of men. Claudia Clair made this most beautiful vase with flowers all the way around the outside and Atefeh's photograph inside. Then she took the vase to the Iranian Embassy in London and, on the pavement outside, she smashed the vase deliberately in a kind of a bit of performance art and the vase that's on display now in the women's art collection is pieced back together with gold but you can see Atefeh through a hole in the vase. I saw this in an exhibition and I was so moved by it. There was lots of art in this exhibition and I kept going back to that vase because it told me something about a beautiful young woman whose life had been shattered by abuse but also in the re-piecing of the vase Claudia Clair was saying something about the continuing value of Atefeh's life. So the Arts engage our emotions.

There's an American pastor called Nadia Bolz-Weber and she says that art can excavate a buried thing in us. It engages the emotions, moving reconciliation beyond the head and argument where it often remains into our emotions and our imagination. I think that storytelling also can provoke activism - we see a story, we feel it and it makes us want to do something. We had this amazing dance piece in the cathedral for one of our spring festivals and the dancers performed their piece around a revolving stage that represented the world. In their movements they were acting out the agony of the world as the climate changes but they kept turning this table all the way through the performance piece. At the end they invited members of the audience to go out and to turn the world themselves, to turn this platform. It made me think about how the Arts can call us to do something because it's captured us and we want to make a difference.

The fourth thing I would say is that storytelling can trigger change. There was a TV drama called "Mr Bates versus the Post Office" which told the terrible tale of how post office workers in the UK have been wrongfully arrested and accused of fraud whereas in fact the impossibility of balancing the books was about a software error. People were arrested for theft; they were imprisoned; one person couldn't live with the accusation - he took his life. This drama "Mr Bates versus the Post Office"

highlighted this story, told the stories of the people involved, and on the back of that drama the government pardoned all the post office workers and released (I think) a billion pounds in compensation. That story did that and I say that with confidence because the problems with the software had been known for about 15 years before the drama was broadcast. The government acknowledged it. The post office was being investigated for it. People had gone to court. Nothing had changed. The drama is shown for 4 days in January 2024 and people are pardoned. I just think that's fascinating, isn't it; what story can do.

The last reason why I think that storytelling is significant in reconciliation is because of the role of imagination in reconciliation. The other examples I was telling you are stories telling somebody else's story but in this work of imagination we tell the story. We look at the world as it is and then we imagine the world as it might be and then we tell that story. If you can't imagine how the world might be then you can't move towards it and so storytelling, telling a story of how it could be different, is key if change is going to come.

Are there any limitations in this approach to reconciliation?

I think that when we tell stories as part of reconciliation we need to be aware of some of the hazards of storytelling. Again, I think there are four or five things that I would highlight.

One is the question of where does the story begin? In the recent awful flareup of the conflict in Israel-Palestine, some commentators were talking about 7th October 2023 as where the story began, as if the horrific Hamas incursions into Israel were the beginning; but if you talk to a Palestinian person, October 7th isn't the beginning and the creation of the Israel state after the war might not be the beginning either. If you pretend, if you say that October 7th begins the story then you're alienating whole groups of people who can't recognize that as the beginning. We always have to ask, where does the story begin? What triggers this thing?

Secondly, I think there's a really important question about who's telling the story, who has the power of narration and who edits. In literature there are loads of examples of what's called "the unreliable narrator", the person who is telling the story but from such a partial point of view that they can't be relied upon. We have to be really careful about our privilege of being the storyteller, being the editor. Similarly, I think we have to acknowledge that there might be multiple stories being told simultaneously. Israel-Palestine is a really good example of multiple stories being told about the same land, about the same conflict. There's a setting of the carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" by a composer called Bob Chilcott; the first verse is in a modern tune, a tune that people wouldn't be familiar with but when you get to the third verse this modern tune and the traditional tune that people sing at Carol Services are played together. It's a really powerful example of two stories at one time. What do you do about that? Which story do you privilege? At the very least, you have to hear both stories.

Then in storytelling there's something about acknowledging that the information we have will always be partial, will never be complete and so I think you have to tell stories in a way that they're open, they remain open, that you remain open to the possibility of there being another chapter or another voice or another interpretation.

The last thing is that you really have to pay attention to language and how people use language differently. We've got an amazing partner in the Community of the Cross of Nails in New Zealand at Taranaki Cathedral. The Dean of that Cathedral, Jay Ruka has written an amazing book about First Nation peoples in New Zealand, Maori people. He gives the example of the word hapū, which we would translate as pregnant. In his book Jay points out that in the Western World we talk about a woman being pregnant, that it's about the woman and her body which, of course, it is; but in the Maori language hapū also means tribe. So there's this understanding that a baby is born not just to the mother and father but to the tribe. He's saying that if you are going to work for reconciliation in any context, you have to understand what the language means to the different parties and to acknowledge that it will mean different things to different conversation partners.

Can you give us an example of how storytelling has played a part in reconciliation during your time at Coventry?

Back in January 2023 we decided at the Cathedral we'd like to have a community arts project where we would invite people from the LGBTQIA+ Community to come into the cathedral and to work with an artist to create an expression of their experience and their hopes as people from the queer community. We did that really consciously because we recognize that the church in general has been a very wounding place for queer people, that it hasn't felt a welcoming place but it's felt a place of judgment and condemnation. That has impacted how they imagine God to see them; they have come to imagine that God also rejects them. We wanted to make space for their stories to be told, for them to be able to share with us as they wanted what their experiences had been and what they hope for their future. Over a series of weekends we worked with an artist and people who came from the community; they created this most beautiful piece of work based partly on the pride flag but also partly on some of the iconography of the cathedral; the thorns that are all over the new Cathedral and the stained glass. The artwork that they made is beautiful but for me it's a container of stories because, as they were making this, they began to talk to me about their experiences and what life is like for them. It was a real privilege for me to just listen to their stories and to cherish them. The really significant thing was that once this piece of work was made, which we called Spectrum, it was then placed on display in the cathedral. That seemed significant to me because their stories that they shared represented by this artwork were then held within the cathedral and it was as if their stories which we have rejected as a church in the past were then enshrined, embraced by the wider Cathedral. It was a really special time for us and such a privilege to listen to those stories.

What reconciliation changes can you see lying ahead?

There are just so many. I think one of the things we learn about reconciliation is that there is never an end to it and it's rarely a straight line from A to Z. It's much more iterative - you go round and round and round in circles.

Thinking about the second world war, that was a moment when there was a rise in fascism and the far right and I think that is one of the really core reconciliation challenges that we face in the moment in England, in the United States, in Germany, in the Netherlands. So many places are battling with far-right ideology and I think that's one of the really key challenges: how do we engage in those conversations? For me, it's not just talking about the far right that needs to happen; it's talking with the far right that needs to happen. That is really challenging and controversial, perhaps, but if you don't have those conversations, how can you ever hear their story? How can you ever understand? I was so struck last summer 2024 when the riots happened after the Southport killings. There was a mosque in Liverpool where the far right went, protested outside and attacked the mosque. The Imam was inside the mosque and he got his kitchen to make burgers of some description and chips and when the temperature was low enough he went out and he fed the rioters. He fed those people who were sharing far right ideology and then he invited the ring leader to coffee. That is really inspiring, isn't it? To have the courage to say to your enemy, if I can use that language, we need to talk; we need to talk about why some ordinary, decent people find that kind of ideology compelling. If I might say, in America lots of people are disturbed perhaps by the election of Donald Trump but we have to ask why did a lot of people who will be decent ordinary Americans vote in that way? I think the rise of the far right and extremism is something that affects so many people everywhere and it needs to be a priority.

Then there are ongoing and complex conflicts in the Middle East, for example, where we have lots of Community of the Cross of Nails Partners; we've got Partners in Ukraine and Russia. We need to understand what it is that we can do in those situations; I think that's primarily about supporting our partners on the ground. It's not that I can go from Coventry and be parachuted in. I think our role is really to resource, support, pray for, listen to our partners who are there on the ground to see what they can do.

What are the pressing needs?

I would say that a pressing need is to engage younger people in the work of reconciliation, to make sure that we're handing on the baton well to a new generation of reconcilers. This is not going to go away. Conflict is, I think, part of the human condition so we will always need people who are reconcilers. In the Community of the Cross of Nails we're looking at ways of engaging younger people and resourcing them for this work. I think one of the ways in which that might happen is by talking

about reconciliation to the Earth, about our acknowledgement that we have not been treading gently on the earth, that we have some repair to do of the earth. I think that that speaks into a consciousness of a younger generation and might be a way into growing them as reconcilers.

How has your time as Canon for Arts and reconciliation shaped your ministry?

I think it's transformed it. I have found here such a compelling work that makes sense of my background as a prison governor and my love of the Arts in my free time. It's brought those two things together in a way that I know will never leave me and so I wear this Cross of Nails. When I become Bishop of Reading I've got the permission of the dean that I will continue to wear this as my pectoral cross, as a signal that we should all carry this work with us into whatever it is that any of us do next because it's a mandate that's been given us by God. As a Christian person, I believe that and as a human being I just see the harm that comes from conflict and the hope that can be born from reconciliation so it's transformed my work in every way and I'm sure it will never leave me.