

## Lent 1: Chemnitz (Coventry version - Chemnitz: Joel 2.12-19)

This week, I have been in Chemnitz, in Germany. It's about an hour's drive to the west of Dresden, in the state of Saxony, the former GDR. They chose this week to join the Community of the Cross of Nails because on 5th March 1945, exactly 80 years ago, 760 RAF bombers visited their city, and between 9.00 and 9.20 that evening almost the whole of their city centre was destroyed and over 2000 people were killed. One of the survivors, a ninety year old woman, spoke of her traumatic memories of running through the fires looking for safety, at memorial event I went to in the city cemetery. This year, Chemnitz is also European city of culture. Like Coventry, it is post industrial, and features post war brutalist architecture, the majority of it in the soviet style, again much like Coventry. Having once been known as the 'Manchester of Germany', it shares with us a low reputation in the country today, and is using the culture year as an opportunity to recover its self confidence and reputation. It's also well known for a high support for the new right wing movement, with 30% of the vote in the recent elections going to the AfD - Action fur Deutschland, their version of Britain First, or Make America Great Again.

Our gospel reading this morning for the beginning of Lent described how God's blessing can lead us into hard places to test or recover our priorities. And our Old Testament reading was a reminder to always remember where we have come from, of the journey on which God has brought us, for that is so often where we find hope. These two things are just what I have the privilege of doing when I visit our partners across the country world, especially in Germany - and I thought what I would like to do this morning is to share with you exactly what I said there, also for the beginning of Lent - and also in English, although my sermon was translated into German and printed in the order of service. There were 500 people there - the church was packed. I hope you can imagine it.

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I started by saying, as I always do, how glad I was to be in Chemnitz, on this significant anniversary, and thanking them for the invitation. As we join together our individual histories of destroyed cities, we pray that out of the rebuilding of both our cities and our relationships, that hope can be born for the rebuilding of other broken relationships and other shattered communities.

On Wednesday - Ash Wednesday, St Jakobi church, joined the Community of the Cross of Nails. It is a worldwide partnership of those who, inspired by the story of Coventry, are working for reconciliation in their own contexts. As a sign of joining the community, all new partners are given a cross of nails - made in Germany, in Wurzburg, but blessed in Coventry - and brought as a symbol of those original crosses, made from the nails that fell from the burning roof of our Cathedral on November 14th 1940, as our city burned. These nails, formed into the shape of a cross, remind us that we can discover Jesus Christ with us in the midst of the worst devastation anyone can imagine, bringing God's love, God's forgiveness - and God's hope. So we gather with a message of honesty about the reality of the world, but also in hope for God's salvation.

We live in difficult times. The rise of a new nationalism across the globe has taken many of us by surprise. And that's perhaps significant, because many of those whose voices are raised with a cry to make their countries great again, wherever those countries are, have felt unheard and unnoticed - and they are now making their voices heard. Those of us who are called to the ministry and message of reconciliation need to take notice. It is not enough for us simply to condemn, from within our own echo chambers. We must also, like St Francis, seek to understand, and to respond in grace and humility so far as we feel able.

Our reading on Wednesday from Joel called us to 'rend our heart and not our clothes' - it is no good simply to wail and cry and complain about the state of the world. We need to come, broken hearted, before God and plead for his mercy, and respond to his call to be peacemakers. Here in Coventry Cathedral, and the Community of the Cross of Nails, we look most often to the words of St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5.18,19: <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the **ministry** of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the **message** of reconciliation to us.

This is God's calling upon the whole church, and all Christians - but some will have a particular calling to reconciliation. Here in Coventry, as in the church of St. Jakobi in Chemnitz we have embraced this calling for ourselves. Through our histories, God has broken our hearts with the need to bring the world back to God, and one another, in the journey of reconciliation. Reconciliation, we like to say, is a journey from a fractured past towards a shared future. We know that we are never going to see perfect relationships across the whole human family, either between ourselves or with God. There will always be successes and failures, the need for repentance and forgiveness, but we work for all that's good, knowing that it's God's work, which God has called us into, and for which God will guide and empower us by the Holy Spirit.

As each new partner joins the Community of the Cross of Nails, they join with others on this journey, and we can encourage and support one another on the road, as we learn from each other and pray for one another. I reminded them that we have been praying for them in Coventry as they prepared to take this step, and that we will continue to do so - as we pray that they will pray for us.

How do we engage in this journey from a fractured past towards a shared future? In the Community of the Cross of Nails, we speak of three priorities which I am here to commend to you for your own work. They are: healing the wounds of history; learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity; and building a culture of justice and peace. The first, **healing the wounds of history**, means listening to the stories of the past. Where have there been hurts, perhaps passed down through generations, which have left whole groups of people with a sense of marginalisation, of being denied justice in one way or another? One of the things I have very much appreciated in my many visits to Germany is listening and seeking to understand some of the long lasting impacts of the division and then reunification of your own country. In my own country, the historic conquering of the Scottish, Irish and Welsh peoples still leaves scars which can go unrecognised by some, but keenly felt by others. My colleague David Porter, who is from Northern Ireland, likes to say that the root of the troubles in Ulster is "that the English can't remember what the Irish can't forget." The work of reconciliation begins with listening, allowing stories to be told and heard. Is it possible for me to tell my enemy's story in a way which they recognise as being true to their experience?

The second priority - and they do not have to be followed in this order - is to look around us today, and to **learn to live with difference and celebrate diversity**. God has made us all different, but we often choose to gather only with those who look like us, or share our views. What of those whose experiences are quite different, whose views we may even find offensive. Can we find it within ourselves to discover the reasons why they look at the world in a such different way? That will mean spending time with people we may find uncomfortable. To leave our own people behind, for a time. The Mennonite theologian John Paul Lederach says, "You have never really engaged in the work of reconciliation until your own people think that you have betrayed them."

The third looks ahead to the future, **to build a culture of justice and peace**. In the Community of the Cross of Nails, we have around 60 International Cross of Nails Schools, which we call ICONS. Building a culture for the future often begins with the young, who need to learn how to see the world through the eyes of another. But it needs also to begin in us: just as we need to remember that the young are not just the church of tomorrow, they are also the church of today - those of us who are older are not just the church of yesterday, we are also the church of today!

So how do we build a culture of justice and peace today? We immerse ourselves in scripture, in the values of the Kingdom of God which welcomes all, nurtures all, treats all as neighbours. And we seek to be honest about how our world is, and heed the call from the Lord to "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment." Can we use this season of Lent to allow God to break our hearts with the brokenness of the world, and from that place to cry out to God for mercy - much as our predecessors cried out to God from the ruins of our Cathedral, "Father Forgive." They acknowledged their part in the sin of the world which had led to such destruction, praying not "Father forgive *them*", but just, "Father Forgive". Forgive the ways we turn against each other. Forgive the cycles of violence and revenge. Forgive the lack of care for those who feel

invisible. Forgive the thoughtless exercise of power by the privileged. Forgive all the ways we fail to treat each life as precious, carrying the image of God.

On Wednesday, we rejoiced in a new member of the community of the Cross of Nails, bringing another complex story of working for reconciliation in a complicated and challenging world. We rejoiced in the new hope they bring to us, that our world wide mission keeps moving forward. We rejoice that God has not given up on us, God's rebellious children, and that God promises that when we turn to him, he will be merciful and heal us, not just as individuals, but as a world.

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At the conclusion of the service, we returned to the market square, round the corner from the church, following the cross of nails, and carrying candles, which we placed on the ground in front of a cross, singing the Taize chant *Dona Nobis Pacem*, give us peace. Then we walked back to the church to place the cross in its resting place, in a beautiful structure made of reclaimed apple wood. It's on the Cathedral facebook page, or ask me to see a picture afterwards.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*