

CCN Sunday 24 September 2023

It has been a great joy and privilege to welcome with us this weekend our visitors from the five ancient churches in Hamburg. Together we have been thinking about being God's ministers and messengers of reconciliation in a fractured world.

From time to time I have the privilege of visiting new or existing partners in the community of the cross of nails, the CCN, around the world. When I do that, I usually preach about the history and work of the Cathedral and the CCN. Today, on International CCN Sunday, we have the chance to concentrate on the CCN here in our own Cathedral, both with our visitors and our own Cathedral community. CCN Sunday was inaugurated only recently, as an opportunity for our 250 or so partners in this country and across the world to give some attention to their membership of the CCN, to recommit to their calling to work for peace and reconciliation - and, perhaps, to raise some money for the reconciliation ministry that we share. When we discussed in our international board meeting, made up of representatives from some of the leading countries where the CCN is represented, when we should hold this Sunday the agreement around the table was to choose the Cathedral's Patronal festival - the Feast of St Michael.

This year, our international partners chose this Sunday, 24th September, as the day for our International CCN day - but we in the cathedral chose the 1st of October to mark our Patronal festival, so we have the chance to spend two weeks here on our core vocation as an icon of God's reconciling work in the church and the world.

How did we find ourselves in this extraordinary position of knowing what we are here for in the world? And what does it mean to us today - and what does it mean to those of you who are here as visitors or as part of the community?

All of us experience our lives as the product of what has happened to us, multiplied by what we have done with it. We are not made simply by what has been done to us - but either are we simply self made. This city of Coventry and its churches are a thousand years old, give or take - a history which has had many ups and downs, and considerable conflict. Often characterised by popular protest and uprising by or on behalf of the less privileged, the city has experienced perhaps more than its fare share of the highs and lows of economic, civic and religious life. It's extraordinary that we experienced the destruction of our city's Cathedral not just once, but twice - first in the sixteenth century Reformation, the only Cathedral destroyed by Henry VIII, and then again in the twentieth century, the only Cathedral in this country destroyed in the war.

Destruction alone does not give a city or a Cathedral - or even a person - their vocation, though it will have a huge impact. It is the response to destruction which characterises the future, and the role that place or person will have. Here in Coventry, in the wake of the burning out of St. Michael's Cathedral on November 14 1940, the response of my predecessor Provost Dick Howard was rooted in his relationship with Jesus Christ: we shared in the crucifixion of Christ, he said - so we will share in his resurrection. It was Dick Howard's faith which gave him the hope, and the love, to continue. That was the engine, or the springboard, which enabled him to respond to the destruction of his beloved Cathedral as he did. How else could he have spoken six weeks later on Christmas morning of seeking to banish all thoughts of revenge from the hearts and minds of the Cathedral community.

As we have been reminding ourselves this weekend, this was the root from which the Cathedral's ministry sprang - a conviction that the death and resurrection of Jesus has the power to transform all human life and relationship, so that what looks like an end can become instead a beginning. It was Bill Williams, Dick Howard's successor as Provost, who took that resurrection message so clearly on into building a missional community, formed around the primary purpose of reconciliation.

Paul writes about this transformed life in his letter to the Philippians - the first reading set for this morning. Live in the new life which Christ has called you to, he says - as if the old life has literally come to an end. Being Paul, he is always realistic - it's not easy, he says, and your life will include struggle and suffering, but stay faithful to Christ. His letter to the Philippians was written to a Church often in dispute with itself, with factions and quarrels, like so many of the early church communities - and so he calls them to serve one another as Christ came to serve them. That's not necessarily an easy life - but it is a worthwhile life, in which we lay the building blocks for eternity.

It's easy on a day like this to focus on the past, on the great figures in our shared history. Yet the gospel reading drives us, whoever we are, to look to our own place in building for the future. Yes, it was Dick Howard who bore the heat of the day, or the heat of the night, of the blitz and its aftermath. It was Bill Williams who bore the brunt of creating the community around the new Cathedral, welcoming German visitors as we have this weekend and being accused of accepting blood money. But the work is now up to us: to you and me, to continue in this great work of reconciliation, of building the Kingdom of God.

Inspired by the story here, that devastation can become an opportunity to be joined to Christ and experience and share his resurrection, what part are you being called to play in the great story of this Cathedral community, here in Coventry or across the world in the Community of the Cross of Nails? You are not here by accident today - whether you have been part of this journey for many years, or whether you are one who has been brought in just this weekend, just today even, God calls you and you are welcome to be one of God's ministers and messengers of reconciliation.

There are many different ways to explain what reconciliation means - in the community of the cross of nails we speak of healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity, and building a culture of justice and peace. All these speak of a movement: healing, learning, building. A journey of reconciliation, transforming conflict and division, moving from a fractured past towards a shared future. Paul's letter reminds us that even within the church - perhaps especially within the church - this will not be easy or straightforward. Jesus' words in the gospel remind us to be generous with one another, always welcoming one another to play the part we have been given.

I am so grateful for the chance to be part of this incredible movement which is the Community of the Cross of Nails - it holds our core purpose and calling here in Coventry, a purpose which is far wider than the Cathedral, but which springs from all that Jesus has done here, turning our own shattered past, still accessible to us in the Ruins, into an incredible future, held open for us in this extraordinary and majestic space.

Next week in our Patronal festival we will continue to reflect on all that God is calling us to be and to do here, but for now, we give thanks to God for his calling upon us, for the part God has given each of us to play, for being in this place at this time.

Now to the God 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