

Christmas Day 2025 Coventry cathedral

It's hard to believe that it's 85 years since these words were spoken as a message to the whole wide world. 'The bells of the bombed cathedral of Coventry striking 2 on the afternoon of this Christmas Day sound the greetings of Britain to the world. Christmas under fire. I am speaking from the ruins of Coventry cathedral Close to where His Majesty the king stood watching the desolation afterwards with a royal sympathy which did so much to raise the spirit of his people in this stricken city. Six weeks ago the enemy came and hurled down fire and destruction upon our city from the sky, all through the long night. So many lives were lost, so many homes destroyed and our cathedral nave and chancel utterly burnt and brought to the ground. It was ruthless, futile, wicked. What we want to tell the world is this: that with Christ born again in our hearts today we're trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge. We're bracing ourselves to finish this tremendous job of saving the world from tyranny and cruelty. We're going to try to make a kinder, simpler, a more Christ childlike sort of world, in the days beyond this strife. We are in brave spirits, and we can wish you all (original words were the empire) a courageous Christmas.'

It's hard to believe that these words spoken almost to the hour, 85 years ago, sadly still have such resonance for us today. For though we do not live in the live conflict and desolation of that night in 1940, we do still live in a world torn apart by the violence of war even in Europe even today. For some here the events of which Provost Howard spoke, live in your personal memory, perhaps handed down through your family and certainly we are alert to it here in our city, as we have so vividly remembered just a few weeks ago. For some here, you may more recently have arrived in Coventry or even have come here to take refuge from the kind of violence and destruction mentioned here in some other part of the world, that you once called home. If that is you, we are so glad you are here.

It is my first Christmas in Coventry and an absolute joy to be amongst you. Having sung the Coventry Carol for many years (a particular favourite of mine) it feels significant for us to gather together here this morning to wonder again at the beauty and simplicity of nativity story, especially as depicted within the nativity scene commissioned for this cathedral as it was so lovingly crafted ready for the first Christmas in the 'new cathedral' in 1962. I do encourage you to take a moment to read about it after the service where we had the privilege of kneeling before the crib last night at our very moving 'Form of a Servant' service which is unique to Coventry cathedral. You will see that the artist Basil Spence invited to create this work, herself gave birth during the blitz when and she channelled the memory of her midwife telling her to hold the baby in her arms rather than placing him in a crib so that he would be safer. The oversized hand of Mary in which the Christ child is nestled, reminding us of the way we are held in the love of Christ even to this day.

That story continues to speak afresh to our hearts in 2025 as we heard in our first reading:

‘For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’

Today we join with those gathering for worship all around the world, thinking especially of our global partners joined with us through the reconciliation story born here 85 years ago. We remember our partners in the community of the cross of nails working for peace in their contexts and today we gather not to take up arms in the fight for peace but to kneel at the crib of the Christ child. This is where peace begins. It begins in humility; it begins in laying down that which would destroy and instead looking to the one who was promised who came to usher in a new reign of humility and light. That decision made 85 years ago and the declaration that we are those who seek not revenge but rather to try to make a kinder simpler a more Christ childlike sort of world. This is not simply an abstract commitment made by a past generation; it is an invitation to each one of us to join in this movement belonging to the prince of peace.

And it begins in here, within each of our hearts, a difficult yet simple decision. If I think about what has brought joy in my first year here in Coventry, as I reflect with you all on this first Christmas here, it has been situations, moments and places, where people are exhibiting or working towards peace. The far less enjoyable bits (common to every bishop and diocese) are the situations of strife and conflict where people have fallen out with each other or the church. Some, years before my arrival but still living in the pain of that strife. So let me share a few of the best bits. A church school (we have 76 of these and many community schools too) where there are not just ICON ambassadors but also HAPPINESS ambassadors encouraging the wellbeing of their fellow pupils and I came away from that day thinking we would all do well to have happiness ambassadors in our lives and households. Then, just last week spending time with a group of men in the chaplaincy at Onley prison where I was able to share with them about Advent and the prince of peace coming and the fact that his peace is no respecter of bars or prison walls but much more about the freedom we can find in our hearts and lives and it was moving to hear the response, we like what you said about peace Miss, please come again. And I said I would and I shared where I would be on Christmas morning and that I would bring them here for your remembrance. Then the many confirmation candidates (almost 100 in a month during Autumn) who were able to testify to finding freedom and peace through their relationship with Jesus Christ bringing them to confirmation of their faith.

Our gospel reading goes on to describe the scene of that royal birth: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’

The invitation is to come to the stable and to worship the Christ child.

Whatever else is going on today in our world, our nation even in our won families and households, the truth is that this invitation is for each one of us. The invitation comes to us in Jesus, and we must make our response.

Our gospel reading records the different responses of those gathered at that first Christmas scene. For the angels they sing out glory to God – for the shepherds they hurry to find the one who has been promised and for Mary she receives all that has been spoken and ponders these words in her heart.

I wonder where we find ourselves today in response to the arrival of the prince of peace. Perhaps it's your first Christmas in Coventry too, perhaps you have come to find the one you have been searching for, unsure but desiring a different way to love, if that's you, you have come to the right place. The invitation is for every one of us.

In a few moments we will gather at the table prepared for us with the meal we share in his name. All are welcome to join in. Here in Coventry everybody welcome is a core principle of this cathedral church with hospitality playing a major part in the life of this place. Very specially today Dean John will preside for us for his last Christmas as Dean – though please don't say goodbye to him yet he has a fair few months to go that will be for May '26 but he will say the words - Christ is the true bread which has come down from heaven. And we shall respond: Lord, give us the bread always, as we are invited to come.

The question then is how we will respond to that invitation.

Perhaps we will come in joyful adoration – glory to God in the highest

Perhaps with eager longing like the shepherds

Or perhaps with pensive and patient love recognising our part in the big story of peace that God longs to bring to his world as Mary did.

Wherever you find yourself today may you know the peace of the Christ child and be renewed in his love ready to be sent out to build a simpler more Christ child like kind of a world today and for all your days to come.

A very very happy Christmas to you all. Amen

+Sophie (Bishop of Coventry)