

Easter Sunday 2025 **Why do we need to keep telling the story?** Acts 9.36-end; Jn 10.22-30

It's been another busy week in the Cathedral, as the nation has marked VE day, and many people have looked to Coventry to anchor their reflections. On Monday, the BBC Radio Four today programme was broadcast from the Provosts Vestry, with the delightful Anna Foster sitting under the portraits of my predecessors, popping up to the Nave from time to time to offer her impressions of the space, and especially the glass. On Thursday, here in Coventry we rang the bells, welcomed a lantern procession to the Cathedral, sang and prayed at Evensong. Meanwhile, taking Coventry out on the road as it were, I was in Berlin for a service to mark the liberation from the evil of National Socialism in our sister church, the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedechtniskirche - also incorporating a preserved ruin, coupled with a beautiful new building, consecrated just a year before ours, in 1961. It's a lovely place, with striking blue glass filling most of the internal walls. I've been there many times, and we have received their ministers here to preach. This time, all the leaders of the German government were there, including the Federal president, Herr Steinmeier, the newly elected Chancellor Mertz and many others. There was huge security. I had agreed to fly out to lead the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation, which we say everyday here in the Cathedral, except Sundays (pick up a copy of the text if you don't have one) - and in the end the whole service was hung around that text, and given the title Father Forgive, *Vater Vergib* in German, on the front of the service sheet. My part was to offer an introduction and explanation of the Litany, in English, and then to read the opening and closing lines, with each of the seven biddings led in a different language from a different country - beginning with Ukraine. That was led by Pastor Alexander Gross, who leads our Community of the Cross of Nails partner church in Odessa - which I visited in July last year, as some of you may remember.

The service was broadcast live on German national TV, with an audience, I was told, of around one million people - and I was told that it was likely that my part would have featured on the national news, as being slightly distinctive. I felt very much as though I was stepping into the shoes of one of my predecessors, Provost Bill Williams, as I stood there in my Coventry Cassock, surplice, hood and scarf amongst all the Lutheran black cassocks. I don't usually take the whole Coventry kit when I travel, preferring Canon Paul Oestreicher's example of simple alb and Coventry stole - but on this occasion, it seemed important. ITV came to film me packing it into my suitcase, before I went, though I don't know if they used it.

Why is all this important? I've done a number of interviews this week, all of which have wanted to know why we need to keep remembering the war, and the Coventry blitz in particular? Surely it's time to move on? A similar question was asked quite early in my time in the Cathedral when Simon Jenkins wrote an article in the Guardian complaining that the British 'fetishise ruins', preserving them for no apparent reason - in contrast to the European preference for rebuilding destroyed buildings to return them to their former glory, and remove the signs of war. At the time, prompted by members of the Cathedral community, I wrote to the paper, telling the story of a young girl from Coventry who was upset at the scaffolding which was up around the ruins at the time. She said to her granny - who was doing my health check, and told me the story - "Granny, are they fixing the Cathedral? If they mend it, how will we remember?"

The truth is that we will be shaped by our history - we can't avoid it. But we will be shaped by the way we tell that history - and in particular whether it is an unhealed and festering wound which will continue to push us towards resistance and revenge, a response which swears "never again", and defends, or attacks, to make sure that is the case - hoping that in the next conflict, we will win. On the other hand, it can lead to a reconciliation, which also says, "never again", but seeks to ensure that outcome by rebuilding relationships so that war will not happen, that there will not be a next conflict.

On Radio Four, in the very few moments I was given, I was able to describe the experience of the building, leading us from the reality of devastation in the Ruins into the space and hope of the new Cathedral. I was also able to speak of the lesson I had learned in Dresden in 2013, that war begins in the mind, before it begins on the ground - the second world war began with the election of Adolf Hitler as German chancellor in 1933 - and to take that forward into our message, that peace also begins in the mind, before it begins on the ground. So we need to be building the foundations for peace all the time, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity, as we say in the Community of the Cross of Nails.

Building peace in the mind means telling stories, stories of how enemies were able to become friends. Stories of how devastation became the opportunity to bring something new and wonderful to birth - this amazing building, the building of our sister church in Berlin, the relationships which meant that I looked into the face of the German Federal President, and their new Chancellor, and said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" ... and a little later, "Be kind to one another, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you". It was a striking moment.

Telling stories of redemption is the theme of this Easter season in the Church's year. When I was thinking about what to say this morning, I more or less wanted simply to refer you back to what I said three weeks ago on Easter day! The first Easter broke open the inevitability of history, which had known no more hope than limiting revenge to 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life'. Easter Day introduced something completely new into human history: a person who was dead did not stay dead. The rules were not just broken, they were changed - that in Jesus Christ, something completely new can take place.

It had never happened before, before - but now it has happened, and so now, because it's happened before, it can happen again. Are you with me? That's why we need to keep telling the story of Easter - that's why we need to keep telling the story of enemies becoming friends in Coventry and Germany, in Dresden, in Berlin, in Hamburg - in the 80 centres with which we are partners. because it's happened before, it can happen again, and can keep happening, if we allow ourselves to live for that hope, and shape our lives and actions around it.

As I looked at this morning's readings from scripture, it wasn't easy for me to know what to say. I'd already said it, on Easter day. Colleagues have repeated it in the last two weeks. There is life after death! There is reconciliation after fracture. There is hope where they only been despair. But we have to keep telling these stories, to try to bed them in. Very much as the people of Israel endlessly repeat the story of the liberation from slavery in Egypt - it is a foundational story for them, throughout the old testament, or Hebrew Bible, especially in the Psalms. You did it before, God, you can do it again.

Whenever I read the story of Tabitha, the pious woman who cared for women and made clothes, my mind goes to an earlier visit to far off lands, in Dornakal not far from Hyderabad in India. I was a guest of the local diocese, and had been taken on a long tour of the huge new churches they were building. It was very late when we got back to the compound where I was based, but a reception and been planned and despite the hour still went ahead, with local women acting out the story we just heard from Acts. My knowledge of Telugu, the local language was non existent, but as the women first wept and wailed, then held up the garments which the dead Tabitha had made, then rejoiced as she was restored to life, and started to cook a meal for everyone, was easy to follow. It was a story of loss, of hope restored, a story to stimulate faith.

As I said on Easter Sunday, we are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song. We tell the stories, because they help us to look for glimmers of hope, and to live into that hope when we are caught by it, sometimes to our complete surprise. We can be slow to recognise that extraordinary hope that is in us - and nervous to share it. But my visit to Berlin reminded me, again, that we have a story - we as Christians, we as Christians in Coventry, that the end need not need be the end, if we are willing to allow ourselves to be caught up in what God is doing. That was the thing the Pharisees who came to question Jesus could not allow them to do - it was like refusing to be caught up in the lazy river at centre parcs where Ricarda and I went with our grandchildren and their parents a few weeks ago. Something amazing has happened, something which is now part of human history, although also not- one foot in and one foot out, as it were.

I would like to end with a poem which I heard a few ears ago, written by a Methodist minister who had started a service in a pub (odd, being a Methodist, perhaps!) He was a bit down hearted, and wondering whether it was worth doing, when the young woman who served behind the bar said to him, "people like us need people like you", and he was taken up short ... and recognised that as Christians we can be like people silting on a treasure chest, forgetting that we need to open and share what's inside.

People like us need people like you

By Chris Duffet

People like us need people like you,
People like you need to know,
What you've got is simply good, it's refined true,
In a puzzling fuzzy kind of world humbly go,
Clumsily armed with the treasure, armfuls, dropping, falling down
People like us need people like you,
People like you, get your head round this,
It's life, where graves are dug ready to swallow new,
Powerful doesn't even come close, it's a billion mile miss,
You carry the one who shouts like a thousand stormy seas, 'I make all things new.'
People like us need people like you,
People like you, please grasp this right,
What you have is fresh, mint purposeful, it's *kerching*, it's renew,
Happiness Swiss rolled with the jam of joy from a great height,
You are good news, let your mind catch up with this humble fact, that people like us, need
people like you.

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