

I had not expected to be preaching today - but I heard on Friday that the archdeacon missionary, who was supposed to be preaching, was sick. So that gives me the chance to preach two weeks in succession, because I'll be here again next week for the Patronal Festival, brought forward by a week because of the National Police Memorial service the following Sunday. This is a part one, then, with some teasers for part two next week!

Today is Holy Cross day - one of only two occasions in the year when our attention is explicitly drawn to the cross of Christ throughout our liturgy. The other is Good Friday. It's origins are rather wonderful. It is said that Saint Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, discovered the wood of the true cross in AD326 - possibly in the course of archaeological excavations in Jerusalem to determine the actual site of Jesus' death. Between them, they built what is now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the site, which was consecrated on 13 September 335, with the portion of the true cross brought out in front of the people the following day, on this date almost 1700 years ago.

Of course, this is the stuff of legend. The wood of the cross could not have survived three hundred years, and how would you know it was that actual wood anyway? Except that it could have been. In that dry climate, wood lasts for centuries - it does even in ours. Years ago when I went to Jerusalem for the first time, I was not expecting any particular spiritual revelations, but I found myself overwhelmed by the thought that whilst I couldn't be sure I was walking where Jesus actually walked - I could have been. Ours is a historical faith, rooted in the dust stones and olive trees of a real place. And this gives our faith its peculiar power - far from being an escape from reality, it is absolutely, physically and concretely real. The stories of Jesus connect to our lives. The power of God revealed in Jesus can be known by us, too, in the midst of the concrete of Coventry, and in the Church of the holy Sepulchre today.

It's one of the reasons why our baptismal font is one of my favourite objects in the Cathedral. As many of you know, it is made of a boulder from a hillside above Bethlehem, on the road south towards Hebron. It's been left relatively unfinished, apart from the shell shaped scoop for water inside, so that as you touch it you can know yourselves touching the limestones hills where Jesus was born on earth, where he walked and talked with his family and his friends, where he was put to death and where he rose again from the dead. This is a real story, this is real faith which scoops up the whole of our lives and offers them to God along with the offering of Jesus, so that they can be transformed just as he was transformed through his cross and resurrection.

Some years ago I wrote a thesis on what all this means. It was an M.Phil, and its title was, 'The Correlation of Love and Death in the Theology of Atonement'. I was looking at a couple of twentieth century German existentialist theologians, if there anyone here this morning who is interested - Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner. I won't go into detail, but the heart of the matter was that on the cross Jesus does exactly what we are called to do - but cannot achieve by ourselves - and how the universe was intended to work - he abandons himself completely into the arms of God, carrying all human life, the rebellions as well as the triumphs, with him. Accepting that offering, God transforms it into new life, resurrected and transformed life, which is eternal, complete, and never ending.

I once tried to explain this to some young Jewish friends on a pilgrimage through London. We were walking as an interfaith group in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, behind a huge banner proclaiming 'People of Faith walk as People of Peace'. I was telling them about the Cathedral, and explaining our architecture, the ruins and the new Cathedral, and I said, "you know, it represents that whole crucifixion and resurrection thing." Rather surprisingly, to me, they had no idea what I was talking about, so I tried to explain the story of Jesus - starting with the idea of the Passover and the Last Supper, which I thought might have offered common ground. Still no idea. So I reached for my existentialist theology, and said, "On the cross, Christ participated in our existential estrangement, and now it's up to us to participate in his participation." Oh, that makes perfect sense, they said!

You may share their dawning understanding, or then again, perhaps not ... the point is this, Jesus shared in all that makes human life what it is, and also what it's meant to be. The point of our lives is to live them for God, actually to live fully abandoned to God - in a way that is finally confirmed

when we plant our lives in the ground of God's love at our death, and like a seed are born to new and eternal life. This is a glorious thing, something of almost indescribable wonder and mystery, that God can take all that we have done with our lives, and all that has been done to us, and make of them something beautiful, something eternally lovely.

This is all to come, but we have foretastes of it now. And this is where our Cathedral comes in, as it always does. In our Cathedral we have a story and a building, that speaks of sacrifice, obedience and glory. The old Cathedral ruins speaks of sacrifice, something destroyed in the service of others. As Provost Howard watched the Cathedral burn on November 14th 1940, he wrote in his diary, "it seemed we were sharing in the crucifixion of Christ." Exactly - and that is where the power of the ruins lie - like Christ's crucifixion, they are a place where we touch all the sacrifices, all the destruction, all the devastation of the world.

Under the flagstones, just beyond the Queens Steps as you climb up into the ruins from the porch, are the remnants of the choir stalls which burned on Thursday November 1940. I know this because when we lifted them to dig down to the original floor to restore the waterproofing above the crypts a year or two after I arrived I was able to stand there and gather some of the ash still lying across the memorial stones which had made up that floor. Our story is a real story, connected to real lives. It was a story of devastation, yet through it God's power of resurrection was revealed - and so it became possible to place the inscription at the entrance to this new Cathedral, "To the Glory of God this Cathedral burned, November 14 1940, is now rebuilt May 25 1962." God is glorified when we love into his purpose for us - it was not that God wanted the Cathedral to burn, but as that destruction was offered to God rather than used as an opportunity for hatred or revenge, that it brought God glory.

This is the power of the cross, that it is real life, offered to God. On the cross, Jesus took all that we are, all we have done, all that has been done to us, and takes it into the heart of the Father. It was a journey through pain and abandonment. He takes all that, and then meets us on the way back, so that we do not have to go where he went - literally, to hell and back. He meets us coming back, and leads us home.

A week or so ago we had a group of visitors from Norway with us. They have a church near their Cathedral in Oslo which they are redeveloping as a church of reconciliation, and they came to spend a very full day with us to explore what that might look like. Over dinner in the evening, I was talking about the lasting power of the symbol of the cross of nails - crosses, if you don't know, made from nails that feel from the roof of the burning building all those years ago, and now used as symbols of Coventry's ministry of reconciliation across the world. "How come this symbol, from a little island off the coast of Europe almost a century ago still has power?" they wondered. It was a great question, and made me think hard - "it's because of the story it represents," I said. It's nothing to do with us, it's the power of the ruins, and behind them the power of the cross - because it's in brokenness and devastation that we discover a connection, and if that connection then leads us forward, it can change the world.

Unusually, in the past week, I have had occasion to take two holding crosses to members of the Cathedral community in hospital. In recent years, these small crosses, often carved from olive wood from around Bethlehem, have become popular as ways to hold on to what Jesus has done for us. My wife Ricarda is a hospital chaplain and gives them to many of the people she visits, and was telling me about the very first time she did that some years ago, to a woman battling with cancer. "I hold the cross," she said, "and put myself into the wood." The cross tells us that there is nowhere we can find ourselves where God has not been, nowhere His hope cannot be found.

The true cross tells us that God really did this - and therefore we have hope. This ruined and rebuilt Cathedral does something of the same - it allows us to touch hope in the midst of disaster - and to the glory of God offers hope to a broken and hurting world. (Extraordinarily, even today in Jerusalem.)

*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*