

**Sunday after Ascension: John's last Diocesan Evensong**      2 Sam 23.1-5; Eph 1.15-end

*Looking forward in faithfulness and hope. A journey.*

Thank you for coming! It's so lovely to see you all here, and to share with you in my last service as Dean of Coventry - after 13 and a half amazing years and at the end of almost 42 years in full time ordained ministry in the Church of England. It's been an extraordinary, and fulfilling time, and I can't think of a better setting for this moment, in this place which is all about endings and beginnings, looking backwards to the ruins, forwards to the new cathedral. A place which is all about facing the reality of loss and partings, and creativity and hope of new beginnings. And above all, a place to place our trust in God for all that God will do.

I don't think there's anyone here today who was with me in Durham in 1984 when this particular journey began, which led me through ministry in the industrial north east, including work as an industrial chaplain, then outer urban ministry in Nottingham, and on into suburban Sheffield on the edge of the Peak District, from there to Uxbridge in West London and then to a teaching role in theological training back in Nottingham, where I had been brought up, and where my first wife, Mo, who was also a priest, died and I married Ricarda as we blended our families together. From there we moved to Gloucester where Ricarda was a parish priest and I worked in vocations and training across that beautiful Diocese. I arrived into this role on a very snowy day in January 2013, in the season of Epiphany. We thought together about journeys, and refractory camels, and where we might go together - and it has been a most wonderful journey.

We often talk about the journey of reconciliation - and as we also often say, the journey of reconciliation is and should be challenging - a journey in which we find ourselves moving apart and together, working out what it means to be part of the wonderfully inclusive people of God in a fractured and polarised world, with divisions and fractures that can also bleed into the church, and sometimes even start within it. We often say that you have never truly engaged in the work of reconciliation unless your own friends think that you have betrayed them - a saying that reminds and challenged us about the cost of the work to which we are called, in this Cathedral, in this city, in this Diocese of Coventry - and across the world, where I have been so privileged to travel in the service of this ministry, sharing the incredible story of this Cathedral and the City which is our shared home. I've been to such amazing places - taking crosses of nails to South Africa, New Zealand, many times to Germany, the US and Canada, and most recently Jerusalem.

We are called to be friends with one another - as Christians, even to be friends with our enemies. One of the greatest joys of my own time here in Coventry has been to enjoy the deep friendships with our international partners, especially our friends from Germany - demonstrating to the world that even bitter and violent enemies can become the greatest of friends. There is hope here in this place - hope and light that can still be offered in an increasingly polarised world, a story that is constantly refreshed through the rich relationships of the community of the cross of nails, people inspired by our story and weaving in their own stories of reconciliation across political, racial, economic, post colonial divisions and so many more.

But partnerships and friendships also need to be held close to home, and I have loved the dear friendships that I have enjoyed from my earliest days here in the city - on the Wednesday of my first week, I'm afraid, eschewing the monthly Cathedral and Diocesan staff meeting to join the Coventry and Warwickshire Champions across the road at the Herbert Art Gallery. This Cathedral - and my own time here - has been firmly planted in both church and city, Diocese and wider region. I believe that's to be true to the calling of Jesus, who did not seem to be confined to the world of organised religion, but was quick to discover and express God's love for everyone ... perhaps especially those who were not made welcome by others in positions of power in the worlds of faith or politics.

My journey here in Coventry began in the season of Epiphany, of God's revealing purposes in the world, remembering the journey of the wise men to Bethelhem, and of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt as refugees. My final Sunday is, perhaps appropriately, on this Sunday after Ascension. As

the saying goes, Jesus has left the building. Well, physically at least. The focus turns through these few days from past to future, from all that Jesus has done in the power of the Spirit, to all the disciples will do as they are led by that same Spirit. As some of you know, these days from an eight day time of prayer, a novena, for the bringing in of God's Kingdom - a prayer that is commended to the Anglican church across the world. I preached about that Kingdom, way back on my first snowy weekend here, and finished the sermon at my installation with the wonderful poem of RS Thomas about the kingdom, which many of you will know, and which is reprinted at the end of our service booklet today. Together, over these last thirteen years, we have sought to build the Kingdom, a place where all are welcome, all are offered healing, all are invited to love and be loved.

So here we are, about to go our separate ways. Someone wrote me a message which started, "as you prepare to lay down your ministry as a priest..." It was kindly and prayerfully meant, but I rather resist the suggestion that I will cease to be who God has called me to be - rather I will lay down what God has called me to do, here, as Dean. But it offers the chance for us all to consider who we are and how we choose to spend our lives - a question which we have often considered during my time in Coventry. One of my mentors and teachers, Alan Jones, who taught me prayer when I was an intern in New York City for a year in 1980, and later became Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, gave me the advice when I came to this role, "Be yourself and say your prayers." It's stood me in good stead. What does it mean to each of you to do that? To discover who God has made you to be and seek God's help to carry that out, to play your part in the world?

One of my favourite exhibitions here and next door at the Herbert Art Gallery was from Daniel Lismore, a Coventry artist, known for creating a new manifestation of himself everyday. The exhibition was called, "Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken." (It included a ball, where I dressed rather extravagantly in a Coventry mushroom cassock, cross of nails and a rather lovely shot silk cope. I was introduced to Boy George who looked me up and down and asked, "are you religious?")

Finding out who God has called us to be, and offering ourselves to God for the work God is doing in the world has been the task of my life, for myself and others, and it will not stop in retirement. Here in Coventry, it has meant understanding what to means to me to be called into the ministry of reconciliation - expressed as we know through healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity, and building a culture of justice and peace. That will continue in me as I move on from here to whatever life holds next, and we will continue to be in fellowship together as sisters and brothers in that work of reconciliation. And it's up to you to continue it. To make it real, for yourself and others.

My goodness, there's so much I'd like to say today - I've hardly mentioned the arts and exhibition programme, or the football... But in the end, it's all about you. King David thanks God for making an everlasting covenant, promise, to his successors - but his successors within a generation had given up on God's ways ... and the holy land in which he lived has continued to know more fracture than fulfilment through three millennia. Here in Coventry, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to be true to your calling to tread this journey of reconciliation to which God has called you. Coventry didn't choose it's calling to be a city of peace and reconciliation, this Cathedral did not choose to share in Christ's crucifixion, but our predecessors did choose to be defined by reconciliation not revenge, rebirth rather than death, and the light of that path has offered a path of hope to other ever since.

I was asked a few weeks ago how the Cathedral had changed me. It was prefaced by acknowledging that a lot of people have been kind to say, mostly with approval, how much I have changed the Cathedral. I realised the answer to the two questions was the same: this journey that we have been on together not just in this Cathedral, but also in this city, and in this Diocese - is to become the people God has always called us to be. And that is something we can only do together. I am, because we are, as the African word *ubuntu* expresses it.

Those of you who come here regularly will know that I always finish my sermons with words from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, putting our **hope** firmly in God and not ourselves. I'm going to preface those with a prayer taken from the same letter, which was read earlier:

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the **hope** to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the Saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*

*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*

