

## Patronal Festival    Coventry Cathedral: the gate of heaven    Gen 28.10-17; John 1.47-51

"How awesome this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

Last week I found myself unexpectedly preaching, as our scheduled guest was unwell - I preached about the cross, for Holy Cross Day, and promised part two today. As we well know, the ruins of St. Michael's Cathedral speak of the crucifixion, whilst this incredible building speaks of resurrection, reconciliation - and reimagination. Today, on our Patronal Festival, I want to talk a little about our mission as a Cathedral to speak of resurrection and reconciliation in a world that knows perhaps too much of the reality of crucifixion. I also have something else important to say, but I'll come to that.

I want to start with our amazing readings, set for Michaelmas, Beginning with Genesis, we catch up with Jacob, who has just cheated his elder brother Esau of the blessing due to him, and fled from north from his home country, carrying God's blessing but not knowing what the future would hold. We are told that he came to '*a certain place*' - in other words, the middle of nowhere, as far as Jacob was concerned. Today, that place is thought to be close to Ramallah, a few miles north of Jerusalem in the West Bank, and the headquarters of the Palestinian Authority - but that's not really our subject....

Except perhaps it is, at least a little. Especially on this International Day for World Peace. Jacob, we might imagine, was asking himself, '*how did I end up here?*'. It was going to provide the first of two extraordinary night time spiritual encounters for him, one on the way out of the land of Israel, and the other, many years later, on the way back in, at the ford of Jabbok across the Jordan. In both encounters, Jacob was anxious and afraid, not knowing that the future would hold, and needing forgiveness for his past. In both encounters, he receives God's blessing, though he has no reason for assurance other than his experience of God.

We are all on journeys of different sorts. Many of us will be asking, "*how did we end up here?*" We maybe full of gratitude, or we may be saying, "If only things had been different" - either for ourselves, or for the world around us. We live in frightening times. Yet this is not the first time the world has been under threat, and Coventry has something to say into this. In the darkness of November 1940, I'm sure that the people of this City and this Cathedral asked themselves, "*how did we end up here?*" Today our friends in Gaza, in Odessa, in so many other places, often fleeing from the fury of bombardment, are asking themselves, "*how did we end up here?*" Come, St. Michael, and fight for us!

Is it possible that they, and we, in the midst of such turmoil can discover that even this "certain" place we have found ourselves is the house of God, the gate of heaven? I want to affirm that it is - for it is in exactly these places that God's presence is most needed, and therefore where God is to be found, along with God's angels - who are messengers of God's presence and power. This takes me briefly to the gospel reading - and the implication that Jesus himself is the house of God, the gate of heaven, walking amongst us. Jesus opens up God's possibilities wherever we are, opening doors to the future, asking us to follow him.

This of course is the Coventry story - that the power of God's resurrection and reconciliation, God's reimagination, can be known even in the midst of the rubble. It was in the smoking ruins that Provost Howard was gripped by the conviction that resurrection would come out of crucifixion - that the Cathedral would rise again. And later that the nature of this new and resurrected life would be that it was a new start for everyone - no exceptions - and so reconciliation was the fruit, the outworking, of the cross and resurrection. It was the inevitable and necessary consequence. Father forgive - not father forgive them - this is a gospel which includes everyone, excludes no one, even our enemies.

*There is a continuity from the cross as the "certain place" of reconciliation, the place where we meet one another - which is then lived out in resurrection. Last week I talked about Christ*

*participating in our existential estrangement, by which we mean our fundamental sense of separation from God, other people, the earth, and even our true selves. In the cross, Jesus breaks through that separation, reuniting all things in his death. Then, as he invites us to meet at the cross, and to identify with his death and share in his resurrection, the new life we live into is one in which all those barriers are broken down - instead of a life lived taking its character moving away from Eden, banished from all that is good and perfect, we are offered instead a life lived towards eternity, in which all will be one.*

Jacob, the fugitive, was touched by God in the vulnerability of his sleep. With his defences down, he was able to dream of a different future in which God had made everything new - in which his family would reach across the earth, and he himself would know God's presence, God's protection, and God's power to bring him home. He could not know how that would be fulfilled at the time, and indeed his first reaction was one of fear, that God should be on his case in such a powerful way. So he prepares to continue his journey. In journeying we often discover what God has for us - as the environmental activist Rebecca Solnit wrote about pilgrimage: "walking unites belief with action ... we are eternally perplexed by how to move towards forgiveness or healing or truth, but we know how to walk from here to there." One step at a time.

I now have something perhaps a little unexpected to say, on this patronal festival. This has been an incredible place from which to proclaim this message of God's inclusion and possibility for the last twelve and a half years. It has been, without a doubt, the house of God and the gate of heaven. But all our lives are full of journeys, and I need to tell you today that I will be leaving the Cathedral next year. This won't come as a surprise to many of you, but it will mark another transition in the relatively short life of this amazing place and ministry, which has come to mean so much to me over these last years. I came here in January 2013, drawn by the ministry of reconciliation which seemed to me to capture the very essence of Anglican ministry. I was thrilled to discover the rich history and possibility of using the arts in ministry, and deeply confronted by the depth of the financial challenge of sustaining this place and all it stands for, and the potential of inclusive hospitality, especially by removing the admission charge. All this is still true.

However, next year I will be 67, and I will have been ordained for 42 years, and it's time for a new chapter. My immediate expectation is to retire, but I don't know what the longer term future will hold. So there will be a significant transition for me, and I will be leaving in May.

There will also be a transition for the Cathedral. However, my wonderful colleagues, Nitano, Kate and Simon, our chief operating officer, who are my right hands in leading the organisation, have known about this for some time and are well prepared. We have also welcomed our new Bishop, Sophie, whose passion for the gospel and heart for reconciliation have brought fresh energy and purpose to the partnership between Diocese and Cathedral. And I'm not going anywhere for a while - but I wanted to make this announcement today, because it's the patronal festival, when we give thanks for this place, and also because it allows plenty of time before I leave to start the process of appointing my successor.

Today, on this festival, we affirm God's future for us and all God's people. We affirm the journey we have been on to arrive at this place, and all of God's purposes worked out amongst us. I have put out at the back of the Cathedral the full statement which will appear on the Cathedral and Diocesan websites later today, but in it you'll find these words:

"I have loved my time as Dean of Coventry. Leading this remarkable community, with its local, national and international reach has been without doubt my most fulfilling time in over forty years of ordained ministry."

"I will treasure the many relationships I have made here in Coventry and across the world, and hope that we will continue to journey together in our shared calling to reconciliation, bringing together the gospel and the arts in a glorious and diverse community."

"I am confident that our wonderful team, together with Bishop Sophie, will continue to fulfil this world changing vocation, to the glory of God and the growth of God's Kingdom."

It's been quite a journey we've been on together. We have seen the Cathedral full of people for worship, for concerts, for celebrations and vigils. We have rejoiced and wept with one another at the state of the world. This has been for us, the house of God and the gate of heaven, a thin place where we come to be honest. Honest not just about the state of the world, but also honest about the hope of God, which can take all that we are and all we have done and make of it something new and wonderful.

So on a day when I have been reflecting on the challenges of the world around us, I hope we can share the prayer of a former secretary general of the United Nations, someone who knew something about the challenges of the world, Dag Hammarskjöld, "For all that has been—thanks. For all that shall be—yes."

*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*