

Reconciliation Season Coventry Cathedral 2 November 2025

Isaiah 1.1-18 Luke 6. 20-31

God of justice and mercy,

In this sacred space where ruins and resurrection speak of hope beyond hatred.

Open our hearts to hear your voice.

May the witness of your saints throughout the ages inspire us to walk in the way of mercy, courage, and reconciliation.

Amen.

When I was a child, I sang in my parish church's choir. Each week our Vicar would come to choir practice for a 'God slot'. I have to admit that I can remember very little about those sessions, except one. It must have been about this time of year and he asked us a simple question. "What is stopping you from becoming a saint?" I wracked my childish brain. I was always desperate to get the answers right but when his question was met with silence, his response to us was simple. "Nothing" he said. It's a lesson I've never forgotten. You and I may not get an additional prefix to our names, a special day named for us in the Church's year, or our image rendered in stained glass but each one of us is called to sainthood. The word used in the New Testament for saint is *hagios* and it simply means 'holy' or 'set apart'. St Paul often addressed entire communities as 'saints' regardless of their imperfections - imperfections that we all carry.

As we begin our Season of Reconciliation and celebrate All Saints Day, we are invited through today's readings to reflect on Isaiah's call to justice and Luke's vision of the Kingdom of God.

Isaiah doesn't mince his words. He calls out the religious leaders of his day, saying, "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!", a comparison designed to shock. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is a tale of the consequences of inhospitality. A story of the failure to welcome the stranger and then to want to hurt and abuse them. This whole passage from Isaiah is a call to justice. God is weary of sacrifices and festivals. "Wash yourselves," God says. "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed."

This is a call that echoes down the ages to our own time. It is not a rejection of worship, but a call to integrity. God desires worship that flows from lives committed to justice and as we so often say here in the Cathedral, without justice there cannot be reconciliation. Many of the saints who have gone before us understood this. Their faith was not confined to liturgy and ceremony, rather it was lived out in solidarity, in courage, and ultimately for many, in sacrifice.

Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel take us deeper into this vision of holiness. In chapter 6, he turns to his disciples and says, "Blessed are you who are poor... blessed are you who hunger now... blessed are you who weep." These are not abstract spiritual blessings they are real, grounded in the lived experience of injustice, suffering and marginalisation.

Jesus is not romanticising poverty or pain. He is naming the reality of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom that lifts up the lowly, that sees the forgotten, that honours those the world overlooks. And then he turns the mirror: "Woe to you who are rich... woe to you who are full now... woe to you who laugh now." These are not condemnations, but warnings, reminders that comfort and privilege can blind us to the needs of others.

And then comes the heart of the passage:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you,”

This is the radical ethic of the Kingdom. It is not passive. It is not sentimental. It is a call to active, costly love. Jesus goes on to say, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also... Give to everyone who begs from you... Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

This is not weakness, it is strength. It is the strength to resist retaliation, to break the cycle of violence, to choose mercy when vengeance would be easier. It is the strength that saints have shown throughout history. It’s the strength shown by Provost Howard in November 1940. And it is the strength we see in one extraordinary story of modern sainthood, a story that unfolded in a dormitory in Burundi.

In 1997, Burundi was in the middle of a brutal and ferocious ethnic war between the Hutus and the Tutsis. It was an ethnic war that had been ongoing for decades but over the previous four years it had escalated again, killing more than 100,000 people in the first year alone. As the war continued, it was fuelled by young people from both groups who were mobilized to carry out militant attacks. One of the main targets were schools as each side sought to wipe out future fighters for the opposition while radicalising their own.

However, while a generation of young people grew up filled with fear and hatred, there was a pocket of peaceful resistance happening in the town of Buta in South Burundi. Here, a Roman Catholic Seminary had become a refuge for members of the two warring ethnic groups. The seminary provided not only theological education for young men from both the Hutus and the Tutsis but also worked to create a culture of peace in the midst of a civil war. While the rest of the country was increasingly divided and dangerous, this group of

students found solidarity as they grew to see each other not through their ethnicity but as fellow humans made in the image of God.

Just before dawn on the morning of April 30th, 1997, the students living in the seminary were awoken by singing.

They could hear in the distance a group of voices singing a chorus. And as the singing got closer, they could hear one line that was being repeated over and over: "Everyone will be repaid according to their deeds. Everyone will be repaid according to their deeds."

It was a song that was often sung in churches but as the voices got louder and closer, the students realised that this wasn't coming from a choir but from a Hutu militant group that was descending on the seminary.

Within moments, the doors of the seminary were forced open and the attackers headed towards the dormitory where the oldest students lived. By this point most of the students were now awake, and in a panic, they hid under the beds furthest away from the door.

Within moments, the attackers began shooting. The students who were hiding underneath the beds reached out and held each other's hands, desperately seeking any form of protection and comfort from the terror that they faced.

After a few moments the shots stopped and the leader of the militant group told the students to come out from their hiding place. None of them moved. So again the leader demanded them to come out. With no other option, the terrified students finally crawled out from under the beds and lined up along the wall still holding each other's hands. As the attackers stared them down, they noticed this strange sight of Tutsis and Hutus stood together holding hands. And then they told them; "Hutus over here. Tutsis over there." In

French what was actually said was “ours over here; the others over there.” The students knew immediately what this demand to separate meant. It meant death for the Tutsis, protection for the Hutus. They knew well that this is how war works and how violence spirals. One tribe killing the other leading to a surge in hatred and fear followed by reprisal and revenge killings, and the spiral goes on and on and on.

“Hutus over here. Tutsis over there” the leader demanded again. The students didn’t move. Instead of letting go of each other’s hands their grips tightened, holding each other in fear and love. This time their refusal to separate was met with the response the students knew that it would be as the gunmen opened fire and then fled, leaving the students in what was described afterwards as a lake of blood.

As the attackers fled from the seminary, they continued shooting at other students, emptying their hatred and rage on anyone in sight. Immediately after the attackers left, teachers and students ran to help each other and in the midst of the chaos, fear and panic, they bandaged the wounds of the injured and prayed for those who were dying.

In total, 40 students, all between the ages of fifteen and twenty were killed and many more were injured. Today these students are known as the Martyrs of Fraternity, and they are remembered for two things.

Firstly, for their courageous act of defiance and solidarity and their refusal to separate along ethnic lines in the face of violence and death. They refused to let some live and some die because of ethnicity and instead chose to die together as an act of rejection of the civil war and all it was built upon.

Secondly, they are remembered for the impact of their actions. Because unlike all other school attacks that happened during the civil war in Burundi, this was the only one after which there were no reprisal or revenge attacks.

After all other school attacks, of which there were many, there was always a burst of violence as the groups turned against each other in revenge. But in this case, when armed groups heard the testimony of what happened in that dormitory, they lay down their weapons.

While the actions of the students didn't end the civil war, they did break the cycle of violence in that community and left a reminder to those who remained that another way is possible.

Those young men echoed Isaiah's call: "Cease to do evil, learn to do good." They embodied Jesus' teaching: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." They show us that sainthood is not about perfection. It's about courage and the willingness to reject injustice, violence and hatred. It's about choosing peace when the world demands war. It's about holding hands when everything says, "Let go."

And they remind us that peace-making is costly. It may not end wars, but it can break cycles. It can plant seeds. It can show the world that another way is possible.

In this cathedral, where the words "Father Forgive" are etched into stone, we are reminded that reconciliation is not passive. Rather, it is a courageous choice. The Martyrs of Fraternity chose to hold hands when the world demanded separation. They chose peace, and their witness broke the spiral of violence.

As we honour their memory, and the memory of all the saints who have walked the path of peace, it is worth asking ourselves these questions,

Whose hands must we hold? What divisions must we refuse to accept? What cycles of violence must we interrupt? Even small acts of defiance in a world bent on division, suspicion, mistrust and hatred can add to the collective power of the Communion of Saints

So what is stopping you and me from becoming a saint? Nothing but our choices.

Amen.