

Works Prepared For Us To Do

Coventry Sermon, November 16, 2025

It is an honour to be here today and address you, the people of Coventry. Especially at this time of the 85th anniversary of the bombing, and also significantly, in this season of Reconciliation that your community focuses on each November.

Before I speak the message, I would like to introduce you to Dr. Alistair Reese, who is with us today. To me, he is a friend, a father, a mentor, and I would not be here speaking today if it were not for the influence he has had on my life. E pāpā, tēnā koe e te tōtara!

Our gospel reading today isn't pleasant in any sense. With the unction of the Spirit, Jesus peels back the veil of time and sees forty years ahead into a looming doom. Very few people can intimately relate to this gospel, but Coventry can.

Jerusalem

In the last few weeks of Jesus' ministry, he spent his time in and around Jerusalem. On one occasion, as he's walking to Jerusalem from Bethany, over the Judean mountain range, Jesus begins to teach about faith: faith in contrast to temple, sacraments, liturgy—the forms of religion we use to draw close to God. Jesus says, "If you have faith, you can say to this mountain, be lifted up and cast into the sea." *THIS MOUNTAIN* is the key to this teaching.

Where Jesus is speaking, he can see the end of the mountain range to the pinnacle of Judaism, the Second Temple. He says that this mountain, where the temple sits, could be lifted up and thrown into the sea. In ancient Jewish tradition, the sea is a symbol of chaos. When you consider what Jesus was saying in Mark 11 and all the stories related to it in the temple, Jesus was warning that the temple was about to be cast into the sea of chaos and destruction. He was cautioning that unless his generation embraced a living faith, the ultimate symbol of Jewish religion would be toppled.

Today's gospel serves as a clear warning of this parable. Faith overcomes dead religion. No matter how magnificent or old a building is, or how many generations it has served, if a platform or system established in the name of God becomes so disconnected from God's true heartbeat, it reaches its end. If Jesus issued warnings about temple trappings and lifeless religion in his day, then we must approach our faith today with caution. While this isn't the conclusion of my sermon, it must be said: **THIS IS THE GOSPEL OF OUR LORD!** No matter how difficult it is to hear.

Taranaki

Last year, my wife and I pilgrimaged the UK, visiting cathedrals and Celtic sites of significance. It was a life-changing trip. As our tour did not include Coventry, we decided to leave early and make our way here because, in 2015, Dean John welcomed Taranaki Cathedral as a member of the Community of Cross and Nails.

However, after a whirlwind tour, the last thing I wanted was to visit another Cathedral! Feeling tired, we arrived in Coventry, and Rev. Mary Gregory kindly showed us around. I can tell you, it was a profound experience. After spending a few moments in the foyer and Mary explaining the font, I started to cry. Tears rolled down my cheek as I saw, and more importantly, felt something I hadn't experienced on my pilgrimage... here was a space that communicated spiritual truth and hope, through a medium that made sense to our world; in a medium of our time and era, not from our ancestors from a thousand years ago. I found myself saying that this space makes sense to me, I can relate, and the generations alive can relate to this because it tells the stories of God in modern design language.

Now, you have probably heard this story repeated for the last 63 years, as millions have passed through this place. But what you haven't heard is why it's significant to me. The church I help lead, Taranaki Cathedral Church of St Mary, was built in 1846. It is the oldest stone church in New Zealand. Almost 10 years ago, the Cathedral closed due to the need to earthquake-strengthen it. After a succession of several Deans, the Bishop of Taranaki met with my wife and me. A short coffee turned into a very long lunch as a vision of reconciliation was shared with us.

You see, Taranaki Cathedral has a chequered past. In post-modern academia, there is a narrative that says Christianity and colonisation are the same thing. While this is untrue at a premise level, at an experiential level, with many indigenous peoples around the globe, it is true. Taranaki Cathedral is a poster-child of Christianity and Colonisation converging to decimate my people.

While having a vision to reconcile this is one thing, actually doing it is entirely different. When offered the role as Dean, one of my first thoughts was, "Why would I work for the church that shot my people?"

The first Bishop in New Zealand, Bishop Selwyn, who built St Mary's, was also the British Army's chaplain. When war broke out over improper land purchases, he allowed the army to set up its barracks behind our church. St Mary's became known as the 'Garrison Church'.

For the next 2 decades, the army moved along our coastline, fighting my people, who were trying to maintain their indigenous independence, granted in the Treaty of Waitangi. Due to war and land confiscation, many Māori relocated to a village called Parihaka. It was an indigenous city of refuge, the largest Māori village ever, and the first community in all of New Zealand to have gas-lit street lighting. It was a village built around the vision of peace and non-violence, influenced by the gospel of Jesus. Taranaki Māori have a famous proverb:

He hōnore he korōria ki Te Atua Runga Rawa
He maungārongo ki te whenua

He whakaaro pai ki ngā taangata katoa
Honour and glory to God in the highest
Peace on Earth
Good will to all mankind

You will note that this proverb is indeed Luke 2:14.

In November 1881, New Zealand's darkest moment of state-sponsored violence occurred. That morning, the Parihaka community awoke to 1,600 soldiers surrounding the village. Instead of taking up arms, the children of Parihaka fed the soldiers fresh bread. Yes, they feed those who were about to destroy their village, burn houses, and rape our women. Our people refused retaliation. They held to:

Honour and glory to God in the highest
Peace on Earth
Good will to **ALL** mankind

This is the powerful story of an indigenous people living out the gospel. It is also the despicable story of a supposedly 'Christian' people, denying the gospel and acting with absolute violence and cruelty.

This history, along with Taranaki Cathedral's implicit support rather than condemnation of the wicked colonial forces, lies at the heart of the reconciliatory axiom that guides my role as Dean. On this axiom, we turn to St. Paul's crucial reading today.

There are works prepared in advance for us to do.

If anyone had told me being a Dean of a Cathedral was in the plan for my life, I would have run away! But let's be clear. The point for me is not to be a Dean, but to reconcile! To take a history that is marked in tragedy as an oppressor, as an unintentional supporter of a cruel government oppressor, and heal a gaping wound that is still festering today. This is the work Jesus has prepared me for.

When you read this line in Ephesians 2:10, St Paul goes on to say that the vital crux of our work, prepared in advance, is to abolish the dividing wall of cultural hostility, because the body of God—the very being of Jesus—has smashed to pieces our renderings of our unholy cultural divisions and superiority complexes.

Dear Coventry, you have work prepared in advance to do. Work of overcoming hatred and violence through bold proclamations and acts of overwhelming kindness. You are a people on the other side of rogue leaders, both Henry VIII and Adolf Hitler, who destroyed your temples; yet on the other side, you are a land in the heart of England that adores and honours the people of Germany. What Hitler stole over twenty years, you will keep restoring the mana—the inherent worth—of the German people for the next two hundred! You will be a place that feels the perceived drowning of English

Nationalists AND sits with the petrifying trauma of a displaced migrant and proclaim the Kingdom of God amidst both these fearful hearts. You are a healer between Colonial England and Indigenous England, giving honour to the tongue of the Celt and Cornish, Welsh, and Scot.

The work of reconciliation is our work prepared in advance today. It is not a subset of the gospel; *it is* the gospel. It's what Jesus bled and died for. Not for a ticket to heaven, but for the breaking of cultural divisions; for bosses not defrauding their workers; for the honouring of genders, for the intimate bond of lovers, for the flourishing of parents and children. All these things St. Paul expounds as the actual work of the gospel, prepared in advance for us to engage in. This is the demonstration of the manifold wisdom of God being declared to principalities and powers.

Therefore, Coventry, stand in the power of God's might! In this moment of the 85th anniversary of the bombing. Stand in righteousness in the midst of a broken world and heal the bonds of families – because as St Paul prayed, it is for this reason, we kneel before the Father on whom his whole family in heaven and earth derives its name. Keep building the family of God. This is our work prepared in advance for us to do.

No reira e te whare nei,

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou kātoa!