

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity

17 August 2025

South Asian Heritage Sunday, Coventry Cathedral

Preacher: Canon Nitano Muller, Canon for Worship and Welcome.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God,
you planted your people like a vineyard,
tending us with love and care,
and you call us now to bear fruit in justice, peace, and hospitality.
By your Spirit, open our ears to your word, our hearts to your love,
and our lives to your calling,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Friends, I cannot tell you how excited I am to stand here this morning and see the array of colour, the beautiful diversity of faces, the joy and warmth that fills this Cathedral today. What a glimpse of the kingdom of God!

Introduction

In my early days here at the Cathedral, I spent a good chunk of time in our Archives with our good friend, Prof Nirmal Puwar. She showed me an article published in the Coventry Standard on the 21st December 1967 titled “The Night Watchman”: a photo of a Sikh man, grey beard and turban. His name was Mr Udham Singh Giny and he stood guard as the new Cathedral was being built everyday between 8pm and 7am. Standing guard, reading Punjabi books, protecting the very ground on which we now worship. A simple article containing a profound truth- People of South Asian heritage are not guests here, not newcomers grafted in later. But a community that has been part of this Cathedral’s life and story from its very foundations- literally. That article is available at the back of the nave on the screen.

Today’s peculiar readings sharpen that truth.

Firstly, Isaiah sings of God’s vineyard- lovingly planted, carefully tended, given every chance to flourish. Yet when the time came for fruit, it yielded only sour grapes-bloodshed instead of justice, cries of distress instead of righteousness. God’s people had forgotten their calling.

In our gospel reading, Jesus, too, speaks with urgency: “I came to bring fire to the earth... Do you think I have come to bring peace? No, but division.” His words shock us. And rightly so because we are so accustomed to reading about a Jesus who is meek and mild. A Jesus we can neatly fold up and place into our pockets, to bring out again when we need our spiritual insecurities appeased.

But the fire Jesus speaks of is the fire of God's truth and love- a fire that refines, that exposes falsehood, that demands decision. To stand for God's kingdom will sometimes divide, because love and justice always confront systems built on exclusion and fear; and if it doesn't, then it isn't love and justice to begin with.

The Cost of Discipleship

And this is where the challenge comes home. To be a follower of Jesus has never been easy. For some, it is life-threatening even. Around the world today there are Christians who risk their jobs, their homes, indeed their lives to worship as we are worshipping freely here.

- *In Pakistan, families gather for worship behind locked doors, knowing that discovery might bring violence or harassment.*
- *In India, some who choose baptism risk being disowned by their families or ostracised by their villages.*
- *In Sri Lanka, Christians still remember the 2019 Easter bombings, where worshippers paid with their lives simply for gathering in Christ's name.*

And yet- still they worship! Still they sing! Still they bear witness to Christ!, because faith is not casual. Faith is life itself.

Even here in Britain, being a disciple is costly- though in different ways. To choose Christ may set you at odds with the culture around you. To stand for truth in a world built on half-truths or propaganda; to welcome the stranger in a society closing its borders; to say that every person bears the image of God when headlines suggest otherwise- this is not easy. It costs something. Sometimes it costs friendships, careers, reputations. Jesus was right: the gospel divides, because it demands loyalty above every other allegiance.

And for our South Asian sisters and brothers in Britain, there are unique costs. I have heard stories from those who became Christians here in Coventry- one who, when she were baptised at that very font at the back of the nave, faced misunderstanding from her wider family. One man told me how his relatives stopped speaking to him for months after he declared his faith.

And the young woman I baptised spoke of the loneliness she felt when she chose Christ, knowing it would change her relationship with her community. And yet both of them said: "It was worth it. Jesus is worth it." Now that is costly discipleship. That is the fire Jesus spoke of.

Reading the Signs of the Times

Jesus said: “You know how to read the weather- why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” Our Cathedral is itself a “sign of the times.” Out of the rubble of fear and destruction, God planted a new vineyard- a place dedicated to reconciliation, peace, and hospitality. And here we stand today on foundations laid, quite literally, by young men from the South-Asian colonies who have shaped this Cathedral’s story from the start.

And from the very beginning, this Cathedral has also been innovative, willing to break new ground, and open to the world. In its early years, it hosted Ravi Shankar, the legendary Indian musician, who filled this sacred space with the sound of the sitar. What a radical act that was in the 1960s- an act of creativity and cross-cultural encounter, which undoubtedly raised eyebrows. That moment was not an accident; it was a sign of the time, in a place of the time. This has always been a place willing to listen to voices from beyond its walls, to be enriched by global cultures, and to model what hospitality looks like in practice.

So, when we celebrate South Asian Heritage Sunday here, we are not adding something new- we are simply remembering who we are. From a Sikh guard protecting the Cathedral’s foundations, to Ravi Shankar’s music filling its early years, South Asian presence and creativity have been woven into Coventry’s story from the beginning.

But Isaiah warns us: “the fruit God seeks is justice and righteousness.” The vineyard cannot rest on its history- it must bear fruit now. And Jesus warns us: His fire is disruptive. It calls us to resist the sour grapes of nationalism, racism, and hardened borders, even when that stand is costly.

We have heard the call, especially from our South Asian congregation members to engage in issues of faith, to create small groups of bible study and theological reflection, for robust conversation about the faith and our place in it as Christians. Dean John, Canon Kate and I are excited about the possibilities for the near future.

Hospitality as the Fruit of the Vineyard

Walls are rising all over the world. Borders are hardening. Laws are being written to keep people out, to treat the neighbour as a threat rather than as a gift. But here, at Coventry, we are called to a different way. Like we were called on the 15 November when the Provost- Dick Howard- spoke about new life and resurrection while his church still smouldered around him. Hospitality is not optional charity- it is the very fruit God demands of His vineyard.

That article of the Sikh guard shows us that hospitality is not about making room for “guests.” It is about recognising that the neighbour has always been part of the story, that our lives and our futures are bound together.

And let us not miss this: when that Sikh man stood guard over the building site of the Cathedral, he was literally keeping watch over the future. He was protecting not only bricks and mortar, but the vision of reconciliation, peace, and new life that this Cathedral was being raised to proclaim. That is not the role of an “outsider.” That is the work of someone integral to the story.

Conclusion

So on this South Asian Heritage Sunday, we give thanks. We honour the truth that South Asian brothers and sisters are not on the margins of the Cathedral’s story- you are at its very heart. You are Coventry Cathedral! Hear that and own it!

And we hear again the call of Scripture:

- *to bear the fruit of justice and righteousness in our life together;*
- *to allow Christ’s fire to burn away prejudice and fear;*
- *to be a Cathedral where no one is a stranger, because all are family in God’s house.*

Friends, to be a follower of Jesus will never be easy. It will divide, it will cost, it may even threaten life itself. But it will also bring a joy like no other: the joy of knowing that in Christ, the vineyard is alive, the fire is burning, and the signs of God’s kingdom are all around us.

Amen.