



“The Story of Coventry Cathedral”
2 Corinthians 5:16-20a
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
August 26, 2012

The bombing began on the cloud-free night of November 14, 1940. The citizens of Coventry, England were stirred by the drone of more than 400 German aircraft as the planes approached the city for a bombing mission entitled “Moonlight Sonata.” Coventry was targeted because it was an industrial hub and the clear skies provided the German Luftwaffe with a perfect view of their factories. The Germans unleashed over 30,000 incendiary bombs, turning the city into a blazing inferno.

Anticipating that their city would be a target, the staff and members of Coventry Cathedral had taken precautions. They had removed and put into storage the fifteenth-century stained glass windows and they had done all they could to make the building as fireproof as possible. However, under such massive bombing, nothing could prevent the destruction.

The cathedral’s provost, Richard Howard, “was one of four firefighters on the cathedral roof that night, but he could only watch in horror and rescue a few of the cathedral treasures, as the roof caught fire and ravaged the building...When the all-clear sounded just after 6:00 in the morning, the exhausted people of Coventry emerged to find that the historic center of the city had been largely obliterated.”¹

Six hundred people were killed and an untold number were injured. Somehow, the 300 foot Gothic tower built in the 1400s survived, as did the outer walls of the cathedral. The roof and everything that had been within the walls was a massive heap of rubble.

The next day, standing in the ruins of the cathedral, the smell of smoke filling his nostrils, the exhaustion of a frantic night of death and devastation weighing on every fiber in his body, Richard Howard wrote the words “Father Forgive.” It is nearly impossible to imagine such an act.

He could have taken other approaches to the carnage and probably would have heightened his popularity with the citizens of Coventry if he had. Why not quote a psalm declaring that those who do evil will pay the consequence of their actions? He could have quoted the very first psalm: “The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the

wicked will perish.” Or Psalm 3: “Deliver me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.” Or Psalm 5: “The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers...the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.” Or he could have rallied the community behind one pithy line from Psalm 10: “Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers.”

I suspect I might have been drawn to Psalm 46 to remind the community that despite the devastation, God is with us and will see us through this perilous time. The psalmist writes, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult...God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns...The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Those might have been my words, but they are not the words the provost chose. Instead, he turned to the words of Jesus. Each Sunday his community of faith prayed the words that Jesus had taught them to pray together – in the Anglican Church: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The day after the bombing, standing amid the ashes of what had been for centuries a magnificent place of worship, those words carried greater force than ever before. Richard Howard did not quote an entire passage or even a single line. He boiled the message down to its essence in two words: “Father Forgive.” Putting his hand in the ashes, he wrote these words on the blackened wall of the sanctuary. It did not escape attention that he failed to write “Father Forgive *Them*,” but only “Father Forgive” meaning: forgive us all. This act “acknowledging our own sins as well as those of the enemy was courageous and controversial, but it was a vision inspired by God. It gave Coventry Cathedral a thumbprint of RECONCILIATION that continues to this day.”²

In the days immediately following the bombing, a member of the fire-fighting team, Jock Forbes, pulled from the rubble, “two of the great charred oak beams which had supported the roof, and bound them together in the shape of a cross. In a similar fashion, a local priest made another cross from three of the many 18 inch long, fifteenth-century nails littering the ground. Within weeks, the Charred Cross had been set up within the ruined sanctuary. Forbes also created a stone altar from the rubble heaped in the site, so that services could continue to be held in the ruins of the church. The Cross of Nails was set on the altar.”³

The provost was determined to rebuild the cathedral because he knew that it would stand as a powerful symbol of crucifixion and resurrection. God always seeks to bring good out of evil and calls on us to forgive others and to reconcile broken relationships, even in the face of the horror of war.⁴

Today’s Scripture reading from one of Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth must have been a primary passage for the cathedral’s provost. Paul writes, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

Paul knew what it was to become an entirely new person and to view the world with entirely new eyes. He was transformed from a fervent Pharisee who persecuted followers of Christ, to a disciple so committed to Christ, that he died for his faith. Paul knew that if such a

dramatic reversal could occur within him, then no one was beyond God's forgiveness and transformation.

Moreover, Paul declared that God has given us – the church – the ministry of reconciliation. When relationships break, our instinct may be to turn and walk away, to draw a stark line between us and them, but God calls us to the difficult ministry of reconciliation which involves healing wounds and seeking peace.

One day after the destruction of Coventry Cathedral, the decision was made “to build a new cathedral alongside the remains of the former building...The new church would be a sign of faith in humanity and a sign of peace for our future, and the ruins would be a powerful reminder of our frailty and inhumanity toward each other.”⁵

Following that fateful night of bombing, Great Britain would remain locked in a bloody war with Germany for nearly five more years. Yet, a mere six weeks after the bombing, on Christmas Day 1940, Provost Howard gave a national radio broadcast in which “he declared that when the war was over, he would work with those who had been enemies ‘to build a kinder, more Christ-child-like world.’”⁶

After the war, replicas of the Cross of Nails “were presented to Berlin, Dresden and Kiel, German cities shattered by Allied bombing, and the Community of the Cross of Nails was established to further the work of global peace and dialogue.”⁷

It was two decades before the new, towering, modern cathedral was completed, but in a dramatic ceremony attended by the Queen and dignitaries from around the world, the cathedral was consecrated in 1962. Reconciliation remains their chief mission.

In July, Camilla and I walked through the ruins of the old cathedral. It was a powerful spiritual experience to stand in the bombed-out shell and to ponder the Christ-like response of that congregation in 1940 to forgive their enemy and to pledge to do the reconciling work that leads to peace. This hallowed ground presents a strong motivation to let go of any ill feelings we harbor against another, because standing in those ruins makes your own personal grievances suddenly seem petty. I suspect that most people who walk through the ruins and see the charred cross and the words “Father Forgive” inscribed on the wall, hear God whispering in their ears, “If they could forgive such death and destruction, how can you not forgive?”

We walked from the old cathedral into the modern one which is filled with enormous, striking pieces of Christian art. We ventured into the Chapel of Unity, a separate space within the new cathedral. The idea for this small chapel was conceived shortly after the bombing as a place where Christians of all denominations and from all countries could come together. In it, are tables of information about troubled spots around the world – Palestine, Congo, Sudan – ideas for seeking justice and making peace, and a place to leave your own personal prayer for peace.

In that chapel was a stack of pink paper. I took a sheet from the stack that told the story of the “Paper Cranes.”

Sadako was a little girl from Hiroshima. When the atomic bomb was dropped on her city she was contaminated by the radiation and became a victim of leukemia. She was sent to a hospital where the nurses persuaded sick children to take their medicine by promising to fold little origami figures out of the paper squares in which the medicine was wrapped. Sadako's favorite figure was the crane - in Japan a symbol of hope. A Japanese legend says that anyone who folds 1,000 cranes will have their wish

granted.

Sadako used her medicine wrappers for making cranes, praying each time for recovery for her illness, until one day she sensed that she would never get well. She changed her prayer. Instead of praying for herself, she began to pray for peace. To each crane she finished she said, "I will write peace on your wings and you will fly all over the world."

Sadako folded 644 cranes before she died at the age of 12. When her story became known, children all over Japan began to fold paper cranes and sent thousands of them to Hiroshima. The children of Hiroshima raised money to build a Peace Tower in which these paper cranes could hang. The tower stands in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. On top is a bronze statue of a young girl with her hands, stretched high above her head. And in her hands she holds a golden crane. Below, hang thousands of colorful paper cranes strung together in garlands representing the prayers of children all over the world. At the base of the memorial is a plaque that says: "This is our cry, this is our prayer, peace in the world."

The Apostle Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

NOTES

1. Jessica Hodge, *Coventry Cathedral: Celebrating the Past, Embracing the Future*, (London: Scala Publishers Ltd., 2012), p.5.
2. From the DVD, *Coventry Cathedral: 1,000 years of one of Britain's most extraordinary places*, narrated by Jon Snow and produced by Gabrielle Media Services, 2011.
3. Hodge, *Coventry Cathedral: Celebrating the Past, Embracing the Future*, p.5.
4. Ibid. p. 2.
5. From the *Coventry Cathedral* DVD.
6. From "Our Ministry of Reconciliation" on the website of Coventry Cathedral.
7. Hodge, *Coventry Cathedral: Celebrating the Past, Embracing the Future*, p.5.