

***The Introduction to the City of Coventry Remembrance Sunday  
Service at the War Memorial on 13th November 2016  
by the Bishop of Coventry***

Lord Mayor, Vice-Lord Lieutenant, Members of the City Council, Members of Parliament, Herr Stadtpräsident of Kiel, Herr Bürgermeister of Dresden – our twin cities –, members of Her Majesty's Armed Forces and other uniformed bodies, People of Coventry: I invite you to prepare for our city's Remembrance Service.

We are especially mindful this year of the Battle of the Somme, still raging exactly one hundred years ago. When it finally ended on 18th November 1916 over 350,000 British men had been killed or injured – more than the total present population of our city. 310,786 British, French and German soldiers lay dead. Among them many fine and noble Coventrians, including one Joseph Cleaver, whose memory was honoured only last Thursday with a moving service broadcast live on the radio from the Memorial Park. The tree that we dedicated to this young life lost in war stands tall among the other trees of this great Memorial Park, each planted in proud memory of a fallen soldier of the First World War, and some planted in honour of more recent heroes from the conflict in Afghanistan who, like them, paid the highest price for the peace of the world.

We are mindful also this year of the anguish of the people of Syria and Iraq, and are conscious of members of our own armed forces who are caught up in that cruel conflict.

I was honoured to join with the Lord Mayor of Coventry, the Dean of the Cathedral and the Chairman of Coventry's Muslim Forum to call our 'own and other cities in this country that once suffered the devastation of war' to 'use this year's Remembrance Sunday commemorations to stand with the people of Syria and Iraq in a solidarity of suffering'. Bearing in mind that, as always, the national commemorations of the devastation of war coincide with Coventry's own recollection of its destruction on the night of 14th November 1940, we went on to say to the people of Syria and Iraq, 'Our hearts are breaking for you. There is little consolation we can offer [we said] but we can share something of our story that out of the travails of our suffering, hope rose again from the ashes of our city's despair and we walked the long road to reconstruction and reconciliation.'

There was one important moment in the renewal of Coventry's life just a few days after the fateful night of 14th November. The Lord Mayor and the Council were informed that the King, George VI, was coming to visit the bombed city.

Gripped by panic, the Lady Mayoress cried out, 'Doesn't the King understand we're in too much of a mess and have so much to do without him coming'? The entire Council shared her anxiety that Coventry was not fit for a royal visit – they could not even feed the King. They sent word asking him not to come – not yet. The King sent word back, 'we are coming to be with you, and we will bring our own sandwiches'.

Christian Faith believes that God comes to the world in its mess, to be with us in our grief, to give us hope in a better world and to call to us to build peace and even to seek reconciliation with our enemies. As we gather, with many emotions in our hearts and with many scenes of war, past and present in our minds, may we know the presence of God in our midst – in the mess of the world – and as we honour the memory of those who gave their lives for our freedom, may we find not only comfort but the strength to build the world for which they died. That is the way we can most honour the sacrifice they made for each of us, our children and our grandchildren.