

**A Sermon by the Bishop of Coventry in the Kreuzkirche, Dresden
13th February 2015**

Image of Coventry-Dresden Cope



Liebe Gemeinde, it has been a long day, with profound commemorations of the destruction of Dresden, and moving speeches by President Gauck and the Archbishop of Canterbury. It has been a long seventy years for Dresden and seventy years ago it was a long and dreadful night. For some people this year, it will be also be a long night.

It is a very great honour for me a British Bishop to be invited to preach in this great church that was badly damaged and in this city that was devastated on this night 70 years ago by British bombs. I have known of Dresden all my life but it has been only since becoming Bishop of Coventry seven years ago that I have visited it and met its people.

It is a city that I have come to love. It is a city where I have made friends.

It is a city where I was cared for with great compassion and skill in the Friedrichstadt hospital when I was suffering from pneumonia.

It is a city that made me decide two years ago that the time had come – too late in life as you can tell – to begin to learn some basic German. I am afraid, liebe Gemeinde, that you will have to suffer the consequences of that decision tonight.

Of course, the deepest reason for my love of Dresden is the story of the shared suffering of your city of Dresden and mine of Coventry. It is not just the story of past suffering, though, but also the ongoing story of reconciliation that has bound our cities together in a profound relationship of respect and friendship. Both of these stories – of past suffering and ongoing reconciliation – are founded upon a common prayer which is prayed in both cities: ‘Father, forgive’. It is a prayer that I pray with special intensity in Dresden on this night: ‘Father, forgive’.

As a sign of the journey that we have travelled together over the last seventy years, I have come with a gift to the city and churches of Dresden from the Diocese and Cathedral of Coventry to be displayed in the Kreuzkirche over these days.

It is a painting by the British artist Terry Duffy, whose earlier work, ‘Victim – no resurrection’ was displayed in the Kreuzkirche and in Coventry Cathedral in 2011. It is called the Coventry-Dresden Cope. A cope is a large ecclesiastical vestment, worn like a cloak, enveloping the minister with colour and dignity. It became a symbol of division in the sixteenth century when the Church in Europe was itself torn in two: some Christians retained the use of the cope; others rejected it.

The Coventry-Dresden cope is in two parts. It speaks of the divisions in the Church and between the countries and the cities of Europe, especially in the 1930’s and 1940’s; and it speaks of the divisions in humanity.

But when the two halves of the Cope come together, the artwork speaks – to me at least – of three things.

First, that the experience of my city’s suffering and my country’s suffering in war is only half the story. The other half is the story of suffering among those my country once called its enemies.

Second, that from deep within this common history of suffering, the suffering of one people reaches out to the suffering of the other people like arms that stretch out to join hands and, in so doing, brings new light and hope.

Third, that the healing of division between peoples that happens when two sides reach out to each other, creates something of beauty, strength and breadth that is large enough to embrace others who are suffering and provide shelter for them.

When St Paul speaks about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, he speaks of how those ‘who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace: in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might

reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it' (Ephesians 2.15-16).

Liebe Gemeinde, the reconciliation between Coventry and Dresden, between Germany and Britain, is a sign to the world of the one new humanity that Christ suffered and died to create. We live in an age when brothers and sisters on other continents who share similar cultures, common histories and, often the same religion, maim and kill each other in endless cycles of violence. For much of the twentieth century we lived in enmity with each other, and the destruction of Dresden has become one of the enduring signs of the hell into which we descended, a sign that remains a scar across Europe that is seared upon the conscience of my land. The latter story of the twentieth century and the first years of this century demonstrate to the world that peace is possible, that trust can be regained and that friendship can be restored.

We have a word for the world about the one new humanity created by the cross of Christ.

It is a word that Coventry Cathedral spoke to Dresden when it first reached out its hands in friendship, seeking forgiveness when young people came from Coventry to rebuild the Diakonissenkrankenhaus not long after the war.

It is a word that the people of Coventry heard spoken back to them as Dresden not only received as guests those who had been enemies in war but responded with generosity by sending its own young people back to Coventry to rebuild some of the Cathedral's ruins. And all this was happening when ideological and political differences, and the fear on which they traded, were once again forcing our peoples apart.

Liebe Gemeinde, Christ died to make strangers and aliens friends and family in the one household of God.

Let us use our common history of suffering and our common journey of reconciliation to reach out to the divided peoples of the world with the vision of one new humanity bought by the blood of Christ.

Let us, the people of God, who, *tonight*, meet together as one people, demonstrate to the world that together we are built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ and that together we are being built into a temple of the Lord, a dwelling place for God.

And let us be a sign of the reconciliation of all things in Jesus Christ our Lord so that in our own day, Christ may 'proclaim peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near' (Ephesians 2.17).