

A Sermon Preached by the Bishop of Coventry in Coventry Cathedral on 3rd August a Service to Commemorate the Centenary of the Outbreak of the First World War

Readings: Lamentations 1.1-13; Revelation 1.1-7

Suffering cities

‘How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!’.

These haunting words from the great lament for the effects of war in the Bible are always, for me, accompanied by the image of the ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria. Some years ago, before the civil war, I was travelling through the Syrian desert from Damascus to Hasake in the North East. My colleague and I set off early and by about 8.30 am it was time for breakfast and for our morning prayers.

We sat down on a hill looking onto the ruined city of Palmyra, a city that predated the Roman Empire by two centuries years and was once a rich and powerful centre of trade and commerce but was now a desolate ruin, deserted by all humanity except a few stray tourists.

‘How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become’, we read.

We were not alone. In the distance but always in sight were Syria’s secret police nervous about the movements of two English clergymen who were off the beaten track. And I wondered how long this beautiful country could be kept under such tight control. And I feared for its future. About six years later, once great Syrian cities whose names we have grown to know – Aleppo, Homs and even much of Damascus lie in ruins, devastated by violence, destroyed by bombs, torn apart by hatred.

Syrian cities are not alone: sisters in suffering with Palestine’s Gaza, Irak’s Mosul, and Ukraine’s Donetsk. As we embark on the remembrance of Europe’s killing fields and the war that engulfed so many of the peoples of the world and spread beyond our lands to Africa and the Middle East, we do so in the shadow of other dark and terrible conflicts that are murdering and maiming young children and old people, battering their homes to rubble and sowing seeds of discontent that will last for generations.

Women and widows

Today – and over the coming commemorations of the First World War – much of our attention will be on the fields of France and Belgium and the appalling loss of life of the young men of our own country and so many others – ‘half the seed of Europe, one by one’ – as Wilfred Owen, the first world war poet put it in his poem immortalized by Benjamin Britten’s War Requiem written for this Cathedral. We pay tribute to them today: their bravery and nobility, their suffering and sacrifice and we give thanks for them and acknowledge all we owe them: most especially to the eleven and half thousand courageous young men from the Royal Warwickshire Regiment from Coventry and Warwickshire who died on the field of battles.

But as the nation has been building up to these commemorations my mind has turned to the cities that were drawn into the war and the women who inhabited them.

Coventry itself experienced the Great War first hand with a Zeppelin raid in 1918. Great numbers of the women of our city worked in Coventry's famous engineering factories of Coventry that were turned into war-time munitions works – with many of these young women becoming known as Canary girls because of the yellow hue that skin took from the toxic explosive that they had to handle day by day.

London fared far worse with hundreds of raids throughout the war – several of them well into 1918. One of them caused the death of my own grandmother who, pregnant at the time, fell down the steps of an underground station fleeing the falling bombs only to fall herself. She died later having haemorrhaged for 10 days. I suspect medical care was limited for a poor young woman and she would have been weakened by the rationing of food that was biting into the capital. [Her death certificate which I obtained recently made me weep . . .]

Mostly, though, women did not die in the First World War but they did they suffer the emotional death and the dying of hopes and opportunities that comes with the loss of loved ones. My generation grew up under the watchful eyes of – as we called them – our spinster aunts whose sweethearts were wrenched from them by war and who never returned leaving them to face life alone and, for my aunts at least, destined for a life in service.

Most poignant among the young women of that generation who lost their loved ones is Vera Brittain, mother of Baroness Shirley Williams, whose poem 'Perhaps' we shall hear later read by the Lord Major – a poem mourning the loss not only of the man with whom she was desperately in love but also her beloved brother and another close friend.

Remembering

As we remember this day the loss of life on a scale difficult to imagine that humanity inflicted on its men and the suffering it caused to its women and children in the First World War, we cannot do so, in Coventry at least, without remembering the fate of our city in the Second World War. On the 15th November 1940 Coventry awoke like the desolate city of Jerusalem described in our first reading, like a widow with tears running down her cheeks at all that has been lost, lamenting like the people of Jerusalem the fire that came down from on high and went deep into its bones, melting its buildings, even the Cathedral itself.

Whatever war we look on, whether its wars in the past or wars in the present, the lens through which the people of Coventry see is that of our own city's destruction and we see every war refracted through the light of its resolutions to build a different sort of world that rose from its ashes.

Amidst the horror of war, the death and destruction of conflict, the chaos of emotions that swirl around our minds and communities when we are hurt and damaged, a lonely priest stood among the rubble and pointed the city, the nation, the world to the one whom our second reading describes who comes from above, not with weapons of war, but bearing in his body the marks of violence cruelly inflicted upon him, coming to convict the world that the ways of war do not work and the way peace is the only way that will stand the test of God's judgement.

'Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him, even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail'

Why will the tribes of the earth wail when they see the coming Christ?

They – we will wail – because we will see how far violence is from the will of God. We will wail when we see how much the wars of the world cause God to weep. We will wail when we see in the body of the crucified Christ the suffering of all the children of the world.

But the book of Revelation, to which this is the first chapter, ends with the vision of the new heavens and the new earth that God is determined to bring to his world. A new future in which God promises that ‘he himself will be with us, and will wipe every tear from our eyes for death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away’.

Conclusion: Coventry’s word for the world

That is the future that God wills for the world.

But what are we to do in the meantime – in the time of war and rumours of war?

This is where, 100 years after the First World War in the midst of a world where war still abounds and threats of violent conflict are a clear and present danger, Coventry has *A word for the world*.

- † A word for the world expressed in the revulsion at the human cost of war and the impassioned call for it to end.
- † A word for the world that refuses to allow people to remain in a permanent state of hatred in which fellow human beings, especially next door neighbours in the same continent, are enemies.
- † A word for the world that says recrimination, revenge and retaliation are, in the end, self-defeating and that the only way out of the terror of war is – in the words of the Irish President who visited this city a few months ago – ‘road of a lasting and creative reconciliation’.
- † A word for the world that is encapsulated in two words that a Jewish man who suffered terribly at the hands of his own people and of other people, ‘Father Forgive’.
- † That simple prayer, ‘Father forgive’: forgive us all for the pride, envy, hatred and violence that leads eventually to slaughter of our soldiers and condemns civilians to appalling suffering.

That prayer – the prayer of Jesus Christ that could be said by all people of faith – is Coventry’s gift to the world: it marks the beginning of the road to lasting peace and reconciliation.