

**A Presidential Address given by the Bishop of Coventry
at the June 2022 session of Coventry Diocesan Synod**

Last Friday I took part in a webinar with Ukrainian catholic students, together with Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, a Ukrainian Orthodox theologian and Mr Myroslav Marynovych, a leading Ukrainian intellectual and long-term campaigner for human rights who had been a brave dissident during the Soviet era. Our theme was 'How to talk about peace in a time of war'. I was asked to share the Coventry story and to reflect on what it might have to say to the present war between Ukraine and Russia.

I spoke about words and actions that happened around the Cathedral in the aftermath of the bombing: first, the decision to build again, and for the new Cathedral to be – in the words of Provost Howard – a Cathedral of Hope; second, the two crosses – the charred cross and the cross of nails; third, the simple prayer – 'Father forgive' – and, fourth, the words spoken by Provost Howard in the BBC 1940 Christmas Service broadcast a few weeks later from the ruins of the Cathedral.

I focussed on two of those responses in particular: Dick Howard's prayer, Father, Forgive' and his short Christmas homily. 'We want to tell the world...' – he announced to the then British Empire,

that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge. We are bracing ourselves to finish this tremendous job of saving the world from tyranny and cruelty. We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler - a more Christ-child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife.

Provost Howard was clear that there was a tyranny and cruelty to be faced and overcome. Comparisons are never as simple as they might first appear but there is some sort of symmetry in the present situation. Ukraine is facing a tyrannising threat from the Russian decision to use its greater power to impose its will and ambitions on a sovereign state, and to use methods of great cruelty to do so.

Howard was also clear in 1940, though, that sights needed to be not only on resisting the enemy but in building a new world – a world that would be kinder, simpler and more Christ-child-like – so that the conditions that feed war would not arise again; a world where, in time, enemies could become friends and live at peace with each other. That will be the challenge not only for Ukraine and Russia but for all the nations of the world ‘in the days beyond this strife’, especially those who have had some direct or indirect involvement in this war, and it is a responsibility that falls to each of us.

That much, at least, was relatively easy to say to the Ukrainian audience in their time of war. What was more sensitive – as you can imagine – was the Coventry prayer, ‘Father, forgive’. I explained that in my mind it is not primarily a statement of forgiveness. It made no attempt to articulate a sentiment of forgiveness for the horrors that had been perpetuated on the people of Coventry. Similarly, I was making no suggestion that Ukrainians should at this point of their national crisis forgive those who were desecrating their land. ‘Father, forgive’, is not a statement, it is a prayer. A prayer of humility, uttered before the cross of Christ, holding on to hope in the ruins of life of a new future, and searching for the beginning of the road to get there, through the tears of despair. It is a prayer of honesty and openness – that each of us has messed up in some way, that we are all part of the messed-up-ness of the world, that we belong to groupings of human society, nation states among them, that are messed up; that individually and corporately, knowingly or unknowingly, we have contributed to the messed-up-ness of the world, even the messed-up-ness of those who are hurting us; that we all stand under the judgement of the cross.

It is a prayer that is most powerful when those who oppose each other pray it together, when those who are fighting for their cause, believing that they are right, doing all in their means to face each other down, both turn to face God in humility and honesty, and say that we all need the mercy and forgiveness of God.

The radical proposal of the Coventry story is not so much that peace requires reconciliation and reconciliation forgiveness – though, of course, all that is true – but rather that the building of a peace secured through reconciliation that will outlast the generations, relies on an acknowledgement of mutual responsibility for the past as well as the future. This is not

to say that there needs to be some sort of acceptance of moral equivalence that fails to acknowledge the responsibility of the perpetrator to accept their crimes and to be accountable for them. But it is to say, that seen through the eyes of the other and through the eyes of God, none of us, as Jesus showed, 'is without sin', and only he can truly say, 'Father, forgive *them*'.

How is the world, in Provost Howard's words, to be saved from 'tyranny and cruelty' in a world where, in some sense, we all bear a measure of culpability?. How are these evils to be resisted and overcome? Here is a simple rule of thumb: 'By not becoming like your enemy'. Myroslav Marynovych expressed this movingly in an interview in April when he spoke about the danger of becoming filled with hatred.

In the same spirit, Coventry people tried to dissuade Winston Churchill from his decision at the end of 1942 to direct the RAF's bombs onto civilian targets. 'We don't want the good working people of Germany to endure what we have had to suffer', they said. 'Don't do this in our name.';

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, I remember being moved by a brilliant and compassionate Libyan Muslim theologian who had joined the revolution to overthrow the oppression of Gaddafi, when he said, 'We knew we had to defeat cruelty but we found ourselves defeating cruelty with cruelty . . . May God have mercy on us'.

Not becoming like your enemy gives a test for the conduct of war and the pursuit of peace. But the Coventry story has become more challenging for me. I find myself questioning whether the ways of violence – including the violent response to those who are violent towards us ever really works. I imagine a world where the response to violence is not through the ways of war – becoming like your violent enemy – but through other means of resistance – by becoming, in Provost Howard's words, more Christ-Child-like – the Christ child who ultimately defeated the tyrannical and cruel Herod. We know that such courageous action to confront evil will be costly and that it will take time. What we do not know, though, because it has never been tried, is whether its cost would be lower and its

benefit longer lasting than the tens of thousands who are dying in this war that is destined to be long and will sow the seeds of later conflict.

These are complex matters and there are no easy answers. We will find ourselves drawing different conclusions from the Coventry story and their application to this and other conflicts. But perhaps we can agree that the story of our Cathedral, its new form consecrated 60 years ago, will always challenge us to find ways of applying the gospel of the life, death and resurrection of Christ not only to our personal lives but to the life of whole world, for it is the whole world that God loved so much that he sent his only-begotten Son so that we may not perish but believing in him may have life in his name.