

The end is where we start from

06 NOVEMBER 2020

John Witcombe marks the 80th anniversary of the destruction of Coventry Cathedral by looking to the future



The Cross of Nails and the Charred Cross on the altar of the ruined St Michael's Cathedral, Coventry

ON THURSDAY 14 November 1940, at 7.20 p.m., the first wave of more than 515 German bombers appeared over the city of Coventry, dropping the first of 500 tonnes of high explosives, to be followed by 36,000 incendiary bombs.

Over the next 11 hours, more than 4000 homes were destroyed, and more than 40,000 others were damaged; more than 100 factories were hit, and more than 500 people were killed. The old St Michael's Cathedral went up in flames. The city was devastated, and a new word entered the language: to "Coventriate" — it's still used in Germany and France — meaning to destroy totally.

But what should have been an end became, instead, extraordinarily, a beginning. The following morning, my predecessor Provost Dick Howard walked into the smouldering ruins with a commitment to rebuilding, as a sign of hope and as a sign of peace. That commitment set a course for the cathedral, the diocese, and, indeed, the city of Coventry, which has characterised our life ever since.

The words "Father, forgive", written on the walls of the ruined cathedral, invited all to admit a share in responsibility for a broken world; and the charred cross, and cross of nails, spoke of God's forgiving presence in the midst of suffering.

Howard was challenged over the words "Father, forgive": should we forgive at all? And, if so, why not quote Jesus more fully: "Father, forgive them"? But he insisted that we could only stand shoulder to shoulder with all of humanity to seek God's forgiveness for us all for a broken world; and so the word "them" became one that we hesitate to use in Coventry. The ruins became, in that moment, a place for us to acknowledge, with honesty, the brokenness of our world, or our own lives, without pointing the finger of blame. All those who come there are brought to this place of honesty — but they are not left without healing or hope.



The bombed ruins of Coventry Cathedral, 1940

The cathedral stonemason noticed that two charred beams had fallen in the midst of the tumbled masonry in the shape of a cross, and he bound them together and set them up behind an altar made of stones from the broken pillars. A local priest took three of the long medieval nails that had held the roof together, and fashioned them into the first Coventry Cross of Nails: a powerful sign of Christ's presence with us in the midst of destruction.

In due time, a new cathedral was built alongside the ruins of the old, the two linked by a huge porch — and so the building came to embody Christ's death, and also his resurrection. At the far east end of the new cathedral is a huge tapestry, *Christ Seated in Glory*, leading our eyes and hearts in a trajectory from the raw honesty of the broken ruins, through the healing of our wounds in the cross, to the hope of resurrection, and a glory to be shared with all.

WHO knows how Howard was inspired? But it was not the first time that he had called us to reach out to those who were, at that time, still enemies. He was consistent in his message. He led the call to reach out to those who had been our enemies; for the sake of the future, for the sake of the human race, and in faithful obedience to the teaching of Jesus Christ.

It is to the city's credit that its citizens were able to embrace that call, and, only two years after the end of the war, send a delegation from the cathedral, city, and trade unions to Kiel, in northern Germany, with a message of solidarity in rebuilding after conflict. That message of reaching out has become enshrined in the city through our giving birth to the twin-cities movement. Our reconciled friendships with other cities that experienced destruction — such as Berlin, Hamburg, and Dresden — have inspired others to work for reconciliation.



Dean John Witcombe outside the cathedral

Today, the Community of the Cross of Nails embraces more than 250 partners in 30 countries, churches, and other organisations committed to the work of reconciliation. Together, we know that hope for our individual futures must lie in a better future for all. As we commemorate what happened 80 years ago, the quest to bring an end to conflict in every corner of the globe goes on.

The cathedral — with other partners, led by Coventry University — hosts the RISING Global Peace Forum in November: an annual peace and conflict-resolution symposium in which international figures come to the city to discuss pathways to peace. This year, their presence may be virtual, but their passionate intent is evidence that the words of Howard live on in Coventry, the UK's only City of Peace and Reconciliation.

The theme of RISING 20 is "The Culture of Peace" (apt, as we are the UK City of Culture 2021), and will focus on healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity, and building a culture of peace.

Reconciliation is never finished in this life. I like to define it as "journeying from a fractured past towards a shared future". It is a journey from the realities of our present experience to a different future; a journey that the story of Coventry still inspires others to follow — a journey of hope.

The Very Revd John Witcombe is the Dean of Coventry, and is responsible for the overall leadership of Coventry Cathedral's ministry both locally and internationally. RISING 20 takes place at Coventry Cathedral from 11 to 13 November. risingforum.org