A sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry, the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth, in Kreuzkirche Dresden at the Ecumenical Peace Service on 13th February 2019, marking also the destruction the City of Dresden on the night of 13th February 1945 during the Second World War

**Dresden-Coventry-Wroclaw**

It is always very moving to be in Dresden as the city remembers the terrible night of destruction that destroyed the city, killed and injured so many of its people and continues to live on in our memories as a deep scar on European civilization.

And it is a very great honour for me to be invited to preach as the people of Dresden come together from the many different churches of the city to remember the violence of the past and commit ourselves to building peace in the future.

With our Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, I bring you greetings from Coventry, a city that dares to call itself a city of peace and reconciliation. We thank you for these past sixty years of formal twinning between our cities. And we are very glad to celebrate this anniversary of our sixty-year relationship alongside the celebration of the sixty-year relationship between Dresden and Wroclaw.

It is a special joy for me to preach in the presence of the Mayor, Bishop and representatives of Wroclaw. Our three cities are united by stories of war-time suffering and peace-time reconciliation.

**Where is refuge and rescue to be found?**

The background to our reading from the Psalms this evening is interesting. There is civil war in Israel. Saul – the king – is pursuing David whom, Saul believes, is trying to become king. They both have their supporters and their armies. David seeks refuge with the Philistine King of Gath, Achish, Saul’s enemy – perhaps he hoped to be employed as a mercenary against their common enemy. But David has a reputation as a powerful warrior. The King of Gath recognises him and senses danger. David’s plan has back fired. He knows that he is now in danger: ‘he took the king’s word to heart and was very much afraid of him’. He realized that refuge was not to be found here. So David pretends that he is insane. Achish wants nothing to do with him, and sends him away.

Reflecting on this experience, David writes this psalm. A psalm that speaks of turning not to a violent king, pretending to be someone he is not, but turning to God, truthfully, as one who is ‘broken hearted and crushed in spirit’. A psalm that speaks not of taking refuge with an enemy of his enemy, but seeking refuge with God who hears our cry for help. A psalm that speaks not of tactics for waging war, but strategies for seeking peace.

**Where is life to be found?**

In this conflict with Saul David faced danger, witnessed destruction and saw death, including the death of his beloved friend Jonathan, Saul’s son. More was to come. Tragedy after tragedy until later, in another civil war, the death of his own son Absalom.

Faced with the human propensity to disrupt relationships, destroy what we love and even cause death, David asks where life is to be found and how life can be preserved.

‘Come, O children, listen to me . . .

Which of you desires life,

and covets many days to enjoy life?’

Everyone! We all want life? Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, Saudi Arabian, Israeli, Palestinian, Iranian, North Korean, South Korean, South Sudanese, Nigerian, Russian, Ukrainian, Venezuelan, British, Polish, German, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox. We all desire life – and many days to enjoy the goodness of life.

Well then, says, David: seek God, turn to the God of life for life. Live as God desires, and you will have life. That is how to travel the road that leads to life – to life in peace.

And then he gives three very practical, specific, directions to help us stay on that road.

* Advice about our words: ‘keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit’
* Advice would our actions: ‘depart from evil and do good’.
* Advice about our attitudes: ‘seek peace, and pursue it – hunt for peace’

**Seeking peace today**

We cannot have life – life as God wants us to have it – without peace: peace between nations; peace within nations; peace in our families; peace in our hearts; peace with God.

My friends, you know that I come to you from a divided country where some want to leave the European Union, to divide from our neighbours and partners, some want to remain in the EU and honour the covenant we once made, and some are really not very sure what they want.

What does this psalm mean for each of us as Europe – our shared continent – divides, as a covenant dissolves. How do we seek peace and pursue it, hunt for it, in these days?

It is not for me to give an answer to that question for German or Polish people but for British people, on this night of all nights, there is deep wisdom to found in what David has learned about words, actions and attitudes.

* In the debates over recent months – indeed over many years – in my own country the question has almost always been what is best for us, rather than what is best for them, or what is best for us together?

We have asked, ‘will we be richer or poorer if we leave the EU?’, not, ‘will my European neighbor be richer or poorer if we leave the EU?’.

True and lasting peace comes as we speak up for what is good for the other person.

* As David recognises, words need to be backed up by action. In the remaining decisions that face the UK and in whatever relationship the future brings between the UK and the rest of Europe, the psalm calls us to live righteously, to do good by doing what is good for the other.
* And as David knows, words and actions rely on attitudes. So seek peace, he says, especially when peaceful relationships are threatened in any sort of way. Pursue peace, especially when it is hard to find. Hunt for peace, especially when it is hidden, and do not to stop until you find it.

**Conclusion: the call of the churches**

Dear Friends, on this night of remembrance of the past and prayer for the future, this night when Christians gather from different nations and different churches – we are one people.

God, in his Son Jesus Christ, was prepared to pursue peace and allowed himself to be hunted down, and to be put to death so that he could destroy death, restore life and make peace between divided humanity. God is our refuge and we are his people: God’s army of peace. God ambassadors for reconciliation. God’s messengers of life.

Let us be the first to repair what has been damaged, to mend what has been torn, to heal what has been hurt, to rebuild the bridges of trust between people and nations. Let us seek peace, and pursue it. Let us not rest until we have found it for ourselves, our nations, our continent, our world. For God is our peace.