

# **Presidential Address by the Bishop of Coventry at the November 2016 Meeting of the Coventry Diocesan Synod**

## **Death and war**

### ***Introduction***

My theme for this Address is sombre: death and war. We live in a world where death and war are a reality. Yet our faith is fixed on a truer reality: the infinite love of God demonstrated through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How do we speak a word of life into a world of death; a word of peace into a world at war?

### ***Death***

There have been several deaths over the last few months of people who have served the diocese with great dedication, and whom we miss greatly. I think especially of course, of our dear brother Graham Wright, whose absence from our June meeting was a surprise to all of us because we had grown used to him always being there, steering our affairs with great skill, sometimes with necessary speed and always with good humour. We miss Graham today, knowing now that his absence is permanent, for death – the last enemy – has taken him. His wife, Margaret, and the fine family to which they gave life and love, remain very much in our prayers.

Nick Hodges, a member of this Synod and also a committed member of Bishop's Council and of the Audit Committee, and a dedicated Churchwarden of Willougby, also died recently after a short, aggressive illness. Nick's ability to dig into detail and to ask exactly the sort of questions that those in positions of governance and scrutiny should ask will be sorely missed. His wife, Riet, and their family are also in our prayers.

Angela Howarth was not a member of Synod but she was one of the Diocese of Coventry's best. Reader and deacon, pastor and priest; evangelist, cook, host and bottle washer supreme; wife to Chris, mother, grandmother and friend to many with an infectious love of Christ which she shared with everyone she met: Angela has been

taken from us and the life of the diocese made richer by her presence is the poorer at her loss. Our prayers are for Chris and the family, especially for the funeral and thanksgiving service on Monday.

Graham, Nick, Angela and other faithful Christians known to each of us (and I think particularly of Keith Sachs, erstwhile High Sheriff of Warwickshire) who have died recently, died from what we call 'natural causes'; and yet psychologically and theologically their deaths are to us a theft of life, an intrusion of death into God's purposes of life. A Chinese Communist executioner is reported to have said to a Christian pastor: 'I've seen many of you die. The Christians die differently. What is their secret?'. Our secret is that death, though a real enemy with the power to hurt and scar, is a defeated enemy; an enemy, as St Paul says, that 'has been swallowed up in victory'<sup>1</sup>; an enemy that, with Paul, we too can ridicule:

'Where, O death, is your victory? / Where, O Death, is your sting?'<sup>2</sup>

That's why, in their last hours, Graham and Angela held a small wooden cross in their hands – clinging confidently to the battle which Christ won so decisively against all the powers rallied against God's purposes of life and love, a victory sealed and proved in the resurrection which, as Paul says, destroyed death<sup>3</sup>.

That's why when Angela breathed her last, surrounded by her believing family, her husband Chris blew a raspberry at the Devil, defiantly declaring, 'You cannot get her now – she's safe in the arms of Jesus'. You think you won but you lost. You think you stole her life, and, yes, you did. But Jesus Christ – the one whom the Creator promised would strike your head<sup>4</sup> – is the stronger thief for he has stolen death from her and she is more alive now than she has ever been.

'In the midst of life we are in death', says the Prayer Book's Burial Service. It is just as true to say that, 'In the midst of death we are in life'. As bearers of the risen life of Christ through baptism, and as believers in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 15.54

<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 15.55

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 15.26

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3.15

life, Christians are able to face death differently from those without hope, and to face it down. 'I am still in the land of the dying', John Newton – redeemed slave trader and writer of the song Amazing Grace – is remembered as saying on his deathbed, but 'I shall be in the land of the living soon!'.

Over these last two months I have been reminded of the power of a Christian death, a Christian funeral and a Christian grief. We do not deny the pain of all three – far from it – but in them, and through them, we witness to the God of love whose purposes of love prevail and whose divine power to overcome death has been demonstrated in human history by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, his bursting from the tomb.

## **War**

War is on our minds at this time of every year as our thoughts turn to the commemorations of war and conflict on Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, and for this Diocese the remembering of the destruction of so much of the city of Coventry including its magnificent Cathedral on the night of 14<sup>th</sup> November. This year, though, as I have said with the Lord Mayor of Coventry, the Dean and the Chairman of the Coventry Muslim Forum, 'our hearts and minds are focussed less on our past travails and more on the present suffering of the people of Syria, Iraq and other areas of the Middle East including Yemen'.

Seventy-six years ago, great advances in human technology were about to be tested in a torrent of terror that would fall upon the city of Coventry killing hundreds of its people, physically injuring and emotionally scarring many more, and reducing swathes of its buildings to rubble. The technology and skills that had such a destructive effect on our city in 1940 were further improved by our country and from 1942 our bombers turned their weapons of wrath on centres of population in German cities killing, maiming and destroying thousands more.

Three quarters of a century later, the sights in our morning newspapers of Syrian cities look chillingly familiar to the desolate scenes of Coventry on the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> November 1940 and of Dresden on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1945. Technology has advanced exponentially since the 1940's but we still turn it towards the

destruction of life and to stoking of the fires of hell. 1500 years ago, St Augustine spoke of his life before he followed Christ, 'It was loathsome and I loved it. I was in love with death'<sup>5</sup>. He was speaking of the human inclination in a world created for life and redeemed for life in all its fullness, where God calls us to choose life, to choose instead to create a culture of death, to – as Pope Francis puts it – 'attack life'.

In our Coventry Statement, we said to 'the leaders of the nations and groups that are caught up in whatever way in the violence of Syria and Iraq, we plead with you to find ways to resolve your different narratives on how to solve the crisis and, with the greatest urgency, to make to peace happen before more people's lives are wasted in death, especially the children's.'

May I be more specific about to whom that word is particularly directed? It is to the Governments of the West, including our own, and of Russia. It is these world powers that have the capacity to bring peace and lasting stability to Aleppo, to the rest of Syria and to the whole of Iraq. It is essential that they resolve their different strategies for doing so. It is imperative that our nations do not allow present tensions to ignite past enmities that cause our differences to spiral out of control. The stakes are high – not only for Syria but for the peace of the world. There is nothing more urgent than coming to common action in the cause of lasting peace.

There are worrying signs that political rhetoric and military gestures are rebuilding old walls between the world powers just at the point where careful conversation to build mutual understanding and practical cooperation are needed. In our reading this morning Paul said to the church in Philippi, 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others'<sup>6</sup>. Without some real attempt by the nations of the world to enter into the mind of the other and to take the risk of real mutuality, where we seek to serve each other, we will only go on reinforcing a culture of death and fail to rediscover the culture of life for which we were created.

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<sup>5</sup> *Confessions* Book II.4

<sup>6</sup> *Philippians* 2.4

It is only by entering somehow into the mind of the other that we come close to being of the 'same mind . . . that was in Christ Jesus'<sup>7</sup>. And only through that mind, obedient to the ways of God, will we be able – in Provost Howard's words in his Christmas broadcast to an Empire at war in 1940 – 'to make a kinder, simpler, a more Christ-child sort of world'.

The Coventry Statement on Syria and Iraq says to Coventry and to 'other cities in this country that once suffered the devastation of war, let us use the forthcoming Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday commemorations to stand with the people of Syria and Iraq in a solidarity of suffering. If you pray, then pray with all your heart. If you sing songs of lament, let them fill the air. If your places of worship or public buildings have bells, then let them peal for peace.'

And at this Synod, as we grieve those who are no longer with this in the flesh but share in the Communion of Saints through the power of the Spirit, let those prayers and songs and bells remember Graham, Nick, Angela and all the faithful departed.

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<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2.5