

**'Coventry and Europe:
lessons for the UK from the past
and perspectives for the future'**

**A lecture delivered by the Bishop of Coventry,
Christopher Cocksworth,
in the Frauenkirche, Dresden
on 24th October 2014**

Introduction

I am very grateful to the Clergy of the Frauenkirche, and to Bishop Bohl, not only for the invitation to give this lecture today but also for their patience, for it was due to be delivered in July 2013. I had come to Dresden fifteen months ago to help in my efforts to learn the German language but I became ill and ended up in the Friedrichstadt Hospital. It was an emotional time for me – not only because I was a long way from home but because I was in a hospital that Allied bombers had done their best to destroy on 13th and 14th February 1945. Now, decades later, I was being brought back to health with expert skill and great compassion. I am deeply grateful to the hospital staff and to several dear friends from Dresden, including from this remarkable church, who cared for me with such kindness. The experience was for me, quite literally, an embodiment of the peace and reconciliation between our cities and nations.

A great deal has happened in Britain, the rest of Europe and the world since then which have a bearing on my theme. Time and space allows me only to list them.

In Britain:

- The strengthening of the UK Independence Party, including the recent election of its first Member of Parliament, and its (negatively European) influence on the major parties.
- The forthcoming General Election in May 2015 taking place under the shadow of UKIP's threat.

- The Scottish Referendum with the constitutional changes that were promised not only to the Scots but also to the Welsh, Northern Irish and English as a result of the panic of the British political establishment that the UK was about to break apart.

In Europe:

- The 2014 European Elections and the success of anti-European parties.
- The conflict in Ukraine.
- The commemorations of the outbreak of the First World War, with their powerful reminders of the horrors of war between our nations, and their renewal of the hopes that led to new ways of living in Europe.

In the world:

- And all this taking place in the context of a deeply dangerous world situation from the Ukrainian crisis to the unremitting tragedies of the Middle East with the Gaza-Israel conflict, civil war in Syria and the advance of ISIS into Iraq and the international backdrop of the increasing aggression of Islamic Terror from Mali to Mumbai.

Those developments have not caused me to abandon what I wanted to say in July 2013. I have kept to the three original sections that I had planned fifteen months earlier: Coventry and Europe, Today's Britain and Europe, and Perspectives for Europe's Future. But they have led to some changes within each section and to a heightened sense of urgency about the need for Europe to fulfill its responsibilities to itself so that it can fulfill its responsibilities to the world.

Coventry and Europe

Coventry and Dresden are bound together in a common history of suffering and common commitment to a world in which reconciled humanity lives at peace with itself and with God – the world for which Christ suffered and died. The destruction of both our cities

testifies to the barbarism into which Europe descended in the 1940's. But the instinctive response of the Provost of Coventry Cathedral, Dick Howard, to the bombing of the Cathedral was one example among many in Europe that the light of Christian vision could not be extinguished by even the terrible darkness of war. When all this is over, he said, we must 'reach out to our enemies and together build a kinder, more Christ-Child-like world'. Two great beams of wood that had once held up the roof of the medieval Cathedral, now charred from the fires of war, were bound together and made to stand behind the ruined altar. Dick Howard, using soot that was still warm, wrote on the wall behind it: 'Father, Forgive'. 'Father, Forgive': this is what I have come to call the Coventry confession of complicity. We are all responsible in some way for the evils of the world.

Shortly after the war ended, work began on the building of a new Cathedral, rising from the ruins of the old. The ruins were to be left as a permanent memorial to the wreckage that war causes, and a new Cathedral was to be built as a sign of the hope for the future of humanity that turns from its sin and seeks the way of Christ. But even before the new Cathedral had been built a ministry of peace in Europe through reconciliation and the healing of the wounds of history was beginning. Soon it led to a network of centres of the Cross of Nails across Europe. The cross formed out of the nails that had once held the old Cathedral in place, with all their associations with the nails that had held Jesus to the cross, became the symbol of Coventry Cathedral and the sign of the redemption, reconciliation and resurrection of which it spoke.

George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, was the most articulate British voice for the sort of vision for the future of Europe for which Coventry Cathedral was striving both during and after the war. George Bell and Coventry Cathedral were united not only in pursuing peace with reconciliation between former enemies but in a renewed vision of Europe which would restore its unity and renew its moral and spiritual soul. 'It is in my belief', said Bell in 1943, 'impossible to avoid the conclusion that the principal cause of our present calamities is moral and spiritual. The world has crashed because it has gone awhoring after strange gods'.¹ And in a Christmas Broadcast to Germany in 1945 Bell said that 'The great task which thoughtful

¹ Bell, G.K.A.; 'The Church and the Future of Europe' in *The Church and Humanity (1939-1946)* (London: Longmans, Green and Co.; 1946); pp.110-122; at p.110.

[people] of all complexions and countries and Churches should unite is the remaking of unity in Europe'. He was clear that this could only be done by 'the liberation of the soul of Europe, and [that] this can only be done as spiritual force from the outside'². Years before, just prior to the outbreak of war in 1939, Bell preached in Oxford University that 'self-interest can never be a satisfactory foundation for a permanent alliance of nations' and, in the same sermon, called for 'agreement on a common ethos, based on Christian principles' arguing that only then could nations 'be brought to live in co-operation and harmony, and a sound international order be created'.³

The Bell-Coventry instincts and principles are a sort of English shadow of the work of Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet which initiated the modern European project in 1950; and it is worth remembering that Schuman and Monnet were both veterans of the trenches of the First World War and victims of the indignities of the Second. The Schuman Declaration⁴ was first and foremost a peace initiative. It began with these words: 'World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it'. As a peace initiative, it was also an initiative in reconciliation: 'The coming together of the nations of Europe requires the elimination of the age-old opposition of France and Germany'. The aim of the Declaration was to create 'the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace', which would 'make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible'. As an initiative for peace and reconciliation within Europe, it was also a vision for service of Europe to the whole of humanity, especially to the peoples of Africa.

Peace in Europe, reconciliation among the nations of Europe, a vision for Europe as a world-serving rather than world-dominating continent – and all of this inspired by fundamental principles of Christian Faith – these aspirations of the architects of post-war Europe chimed exactly with the hopes of Coventry Cathedral and

² Bell, G.K.A.; 'Christianity and the European Heritage' in *Church and Humanity*; pp.177-182; at pp.177, 180.

³ Bell, G.K.A.; 'God above the Nation' in *Church and Humanity*; pp.201-210, at pp. 203, 205.

⁴ Shuman, Robert; *The Schuman Declaration – 9 May 1950*; accessed online at <http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/europe-day/schuman-declaration/index_en.htm> 6/10/14.

made Coventry an enthusiastic supporters of the European project. As the decades moved on, the Cathedral's ministry continued to contribute to a vision for a better and safer Europe. Its 'Vision of Europe' project (*Europa Morgen* in German) held a number of events across Europe in cooperation with several of the Cross of Nails Centres in Germany, most notably the Benedictine Abbey of Ottobeuren in Bavaria, which hosted the premier German performance of Benjamin Britten's War Requiem in 1964. Nine years later in 1975, a major Conference was held on the theme on the theme of *One Europe – One World* attended by the Minister President of Belgium and the Presidents of the German and Bavarian Parliaments. Canon Kenyon Wright, the Director of Coventry's International Ministry, gave a keynote address which tried to set the agenda for the next stage of the European vision.⁵

The days of post-war reconciliation are ended. The wounds of European conflict, at least in the West, are largely healed. It is vital that the new Europe which is emerging remains true not only to her Christian roots, but also to her responsibility for One World, divided by poverty and injustice. When we look to a new era in which Europe takes a new place in the world, we hope and pray that the CNN [the Community of the Cross of Nails Network], which binds together the Abbey of Ottobeuren, the Cathedral of Coventry, and so many other centres, will be a sign and an instrument of reconciliation, and help Europe to be true to herself.⁶

Helping Europe being *true to herself*: that is a theme to which I would like to return later.

Today's Britain and Europe

Britain's entry into the EEC had not been without a measure of controversy and in 1975 a referendum was held to test out whether

⁵ Two years earlier in 1973, to mark the entry of Britain into the European Economic Community, a televised service took place at Coventry Cathedral. 'A Fanfare for Europe', as it was called, began with the entry of national flags of the nine member countries, included messages of support from Christians from each of the countries and was attended by members of the Government and opposition. Six years later in 1979 the Cathedral was again at the centre of the national celebrations when it hosted a major service to mark the first direct elections to the European Parliament in the presence of the Ambassadors of the nine member states.

⁶ Kenyon Wright; *Coventry – Cathedral of Peace* (AuthorHouse UK; 2012); p.10.

the Conservative Government's decision (and backed up by the then Labour Administration) to take the country into the European Community really did have popular assent. I remember as a sixteen year old trying to convince my grandmother (successfully, I might add) that Britain belonged in Europe. Though too young to vote myself, I was glad that 67% of the population in a 65% turnout voted joined my grandmother in voting in favour of membership. The impressive cross-party campaign, which included Margaret Thatcher, had won the day.

But things feel very different in 2014. A second attempt to pass the 'The European Union (Referendum) Bill' is working its way through Parliament. It will enshrine in law that another referendum will take place by the end of 2017 in which the nation will be asked: "Do you think that the United Kingdom should be a member of the European Union?".⁷ Since then the UK Independence Party has become a significant threat to the Conservative Party and, in a lesser but still real way, to the Labour Party. Attitudes to Europe will be one of the battlegrounds of the forthcoming election. Already the Conservative Party has pledged to reclaim powers from the European Court of Justice and to curb the freedom of movement between European nations.

If the Conservative Party leads the next Government and if it fails to negotiate acceptable reforms to the EU, it is possible that the Prime Minister of the UK will advise the British people to vote against continued membership of the EU in 2017. It is equally possible that whatever the Prime Minister's advice the British people will vote to leave the EU if they are given a chance. As we have discovered in the UK: referenda are unpredictable instruments of democracy, prone to popular volatility.

Of course, there are many firm supporters of Britain's place in the centre of the European stage from across the political spectrum. But I think it would be true to say that there is a general, cultural British reticence over the European project, a European malaise that hangs over the country suppressing any sense of enthusiasm. The reasons

⁷ The Bill is a Private Member's Bill, the earlier version of which ran into the ground in the House of Lords. Whether or not the present Bill becomes law (and the Prime Minister has threatened to invoke the rarely used Parliament Act to ensure that it does), the Conservative Party now seems committed to holding such a Referendum by 2017 if it is in power after the next election.

for this are many and complex: historical,⁸ geographical⁹ and psychological. Britain has a long history of national identity and finds the concept of ceding sovereignty very hard. Britain is an island nation and the seas around us have helped to keep our borders well defined. History and geography have shaped a national consciousness which makes Britain not only suspicious of Europe but also causes its people to treat Europe as something of a scapegoat for its frustrations with the new world in which they find themselves. The British tend to project their anxieties about high levels of immigration, interfering bureaucracy, cumbersome international institutions and loss of world power onto the easy target of Europe.

All of this is easy for UKIP and elements of the Conservative and even the Labour party to exploit. Sometimes it becomes quite ugly with, for example, UKIP voicing hitherto unspoken British fears that late 19th and early 20th Century German ambitions for European dominance are being realized through the European Union and that Britain will be subjugated by more subtle means than war.

⁸ There is something in Hugh Gaitskell's (an earlier Labour Party Leader) dismissal of membership of the ECC that still touches the national psyche – 'the end of a thousand years of history', he warned. Britain is proud of its sovereignty. It fought hard to achieve it and to retain it. It was always on the edge of the Roman Empire. Its Church signed up to Roman leadership late and somewhat grudgingly. The Holy Roman Empire was a threat. It was a relief to escape from the heavy hand of the Church of Rome in the sixteenth century and so avoid that particular form of European influence of the affairs of the British state. Spain gave Britain a hard time. France was worse. Then Britain fell out with Germany and the fact that it managed to be undefeated in both world wars did not make the British people as ready to trade sovereignty for peace in the way that I think it did for the peoples of France and Germany. Before the wars we preferred to build up an Empire. After the wars we wanted to salvage a Commonwealth and nurture the relationship with our American ally in the hope of retaining our status as a leading world power. Europe did not lie at the centre of the national project.

⁹ Being an island does make a difference, even with a Channel Tunnel. It has helped its borders to remain clear and defined in a way that has not been true for many other European countries, especially Germany. When you travel though continental Europe you see signposts to cities in other nations. That is strange for a British person. It affects the way one perceives oneself in relation to other nationalities. And, I imagine that if you are German or French or Spanish or Polish, and even more so from one of the smaller member states, you know that you have to speak more languages than your own. British people simply do not have that mindset. Languages are a luxury, not a necessity for the British.

Although there are particular reasons for what I have called a general British malaise over Europe it would be fair to say that, this side of the recent European elections, it is more clear than it was that the distrust of European institutions and suspicion of the European project prevalent in Britain is shared by significant proportions of the populations of other European nations. The crisis for Europe looming in Britain is not an isolated idiosyncrasy of an eccentric island nation. It is a crisis that stretches over the whole of mainland Europe that demands urgent and serious attention.

Perspectives on Europe's future

What is there in Coventry's story that might address this crisis, contribute to the Europe of the future and inspire a re-assessment of Europe within Britain and of Britain's place within Europe?

The first is that peace and reconciliation count. The record of the second half of twentieth in Europe is very different from the first. The binding together of countries that had once fought each other in war in such a way that, as Schuman said, 'war . . . becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible' is an impressive achievement. It speaks a word of hope in a world where brothers living on the same continent, bound together by religion and culture, are right now tearing themselves apart in war and conflict. We should be shouting our history from our highest European rooftops to the world! And so are other developments in the Union worth celebrating. The inclusion of many countries from the former Eastern enemy is remarkable. The peaceful reunification of Germany and its contribution to the good of Europe is an exceptional story. As a former long-standing Conservative MEP said to a European Environment Committee when 'they were complaining about the rigors of long votes with no cups of tea': 'disagreeing with each other like this was better than killing each other on the Western Front'.

The Coventry story also reminds Europe that relationships are at the heart of human community and the source of reconciliation. The sort of reaching out to communities, organisations, churches, cities, businesses and the building up of long-term relationships that Coventry engaged in after the war is an urgent need today. This reaching out for deeper reconciliation includes the proper remembering of our painful past together and commemorating its conflicts in ways that cause nations to mourn the death and suffering

of those they once called their enemies. Coventry and Dresden have been exemplars of this mutual memorial with our mayors present at each others' commemorations in November and February. We saw good examples of it across Europe in August when the outbreak of the First World War was remembered, none more moving than in St Symphorien Cemetery near Mons when the Prime Minister of the UK and the President of Germany stood together to mourn the dead of Europe together. I hope that the 70th Anniversary of bombing of Dresden in 2015 will be an occasion for the British Government to express its deep sympathy for the people of Dresden who suffered so terribly in February 1945 and to renew its commitment to work with Germany and other European nations for the peace of the world.

The second Coventry contribution to the crisis of Europe is to say that British Howard and Bell and French Schuman and Monnet were right: it takes more than material advantage and financial self-interest to hold countries together. And even if it could, would that be enough for the dignity of our shared humanity? Would it not be another example of European nations 'awhoring after strange gods'? We might have lost interest in the pagan war god, with its glorification of force and power, but we have allowed ourselves to be captivated by the pagan money god, who tells us that all our needs can be satisfied by more consumption, even though the statistics keep telling us that our citizens' satisfaction with life keeps on declining, suicide rates here in Germany and the UK keep on rising and some of our young people (at least in the UK) chase after purpose and meaning in the mayhem and murder of battlefields in Syria and Irak. 'Without a vision the people perish' (Proverbs 29.18), says the prophet. Without a new vision, and of Britain's contribution to it, it may be that the European vision will perish, at least on our Isles.

I suggest that the renewal of a vision for Europe will involve a renewal not just of the sense of responsibility to other peoples and nations within Europe but of responsibility for other people and nations beyond Europe. This is the second dimension of the founding vision of the Schuman Declaration that was expressed at the time as a commitment to the development of Africa but which Schuman later described as a service to humanity that is 'equal to the one dictated by our loyalty to the nation'. He went on to say, 'This is how we move towards an idea of the world in which the vision and the pursuit of

what unites the nations, of what we have in common, will become clearer and what makes them different will be reconciled'.¹⁰

Recovering this fundamental purpose of responsibility for the common good of all peoples, a common good that can only be achieved through lasting peace and real reconciliation, is something of what Canon Kenyon Wright of Coventry Cathedral meant when he spoke of 'Europe being true to itself'. It may lead to a revitalization of our common life. However, Schuman knew that, in order to sustain that sort of vision Europe would need to guard what he called its soul. Jacques Delors was equally as explicit on the spiritual dimension of the European project: 'If in the next ten years we haven't managed to give a soul to Europe, to give it spirituality and meaning, the game will be up',¹¹ he said as he handed over his duties as President of the European Commission in 1993. In 1943 George Bell had been even more explicit and more practical. Communities and nations, institutions and laws do not have souls. Only the people who make them up and enact them do. Hence, he wrote:

I insist once again on the significance of persons. It is on the creation of the common ethos that the future of Europe depends. This can only come about by the conversion of individual human beings . . . Nothing can do more for justice and peace in Europe than . . . the filling of millions of souls with the hunger for justice and the spirit of love. Nothing can do more to save mankind from barbarism than the preaching and acceptance of the Cross as the salvation of the world.¹²

The Christian vision for the world played such a key part in the origins of the European Union that a revitalization of its identity may depend on nothing less than a revival of Christian Faith among its peoples.

Perhaps this is much too much for which to hope and pray. But whether or not significant numbers of European people return to a more active and committed form of Christian faith than we find in our lands today, those who seek to – in the words of the German Chancellor to British Parliamentarians earlier this year – 'renew the

¹⁰ Schuman, Robert; *For Europe* (Geneva: Nagel Editions; 2010); p.143.

¹¹ Fountain, Jeff; *Deeply Rooted: The Forgotten Vision of Robert Schuman* (Initial Media Global; 2010); p.81.

¹² Bell, G.K.A.; 'The Church and the Future of Europe' in *Church and Humanity*; pp.110-122; at p.122

political shape of Europe in keeping with the times'¹³ would be wise to draw deeply on the wells of Christian theological wisdom. I have already made use of at least two theological themes: that of mutual complicity in the world's failings which lies at the heart of the Christian doctrine of original sin; and that of radical responsibility for the good of the other which is the pervading characteristic of every Christian doctrine. I conclude with another example of how Christian theology may help to address a fundamental tension within the EU – that of the relationship between national sovereignty and European responsibility.

The originating European vision was for 'a community of communities'. If Europe remains committed to that understanding of its life together (and that is the only one that will fare well in the UK), then the Christian tradition has some rich theological seams that are ready to be more fully mined. One is *koinonia*, or communion. *Koinonia* in Christian terms refers to an ecology of interdependence in which each member recognises and respects the unique contribution that the other makes. 'Each of us', says St Paul, must please our neighbour for the good purposes of building up the neighbour' (Romans 15.2). This mutual service of one to another not only promotes the common good within its life but also energises its efforts for common work for the common good beyond its life. One might rephrase J.F. Kennedy's aphorism by saying, 'Ask not what Europe can do for you but what you can do for Europe'; and then ask yourselves, 'Ask not what Europe can do for itself, but what Europe can do for the world'.

The theology of *koinonia* is drawn heavily upon in the doctrine of the Church shared by Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox Churches. I suspect that it may be of more help in the re-balancing of sovereignty and responsibility that Europe may need in the future than the more distinctively Roman Catholic notion of subsidiarity which has been so influential on the development Europe up to this point.

Closely related to the theology of *koinonia* is the Trinitarian understanding of God in which the inherent philosophical tension between the one and many is resolved in the mystery of the communion of the distinct identities of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as

¹³ Merkel, Angela; 'Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in London – Thursday 27 February 2014'; accessed online at <<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/addresses-to-parliament/Angela-Merkel-address-20130227.pdf>> 6/10/14.

the one being and life of God. But perhaps this time on a Friday evening is not the best moment to dig more deeply into the deepest truths of the God of love in whose image humanity has been made and in whose common life we are created to share. So I leave you simply by praying that the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you and with everyone in this great city and nation and with all the peoples of Europe now and for ever.

With my great thanks to you for your company this evening.