

A Sermon Preached by the Bishop of Coventry in St Mary Warwick on 3rd August a Service to Commemorate the Centenary of the Outbreak of the First World War

Lamentations 1.1-13; Revelation 21.1-7

Suffering cities

'How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!'

These haunting words from the opening of the Book of Lamentations are always, for me, accompanied by the image of the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria. Some years ago, before the civil war, I was travelling through the Syrian desert from Damascus to Hasake in the North East. My colleague and I set off early and by about 8.30 am it was time for breakfast and for our morning prayers.

We sat down on a hill looking onto the ruined city of Palmyra, a city that predated the Roman Empire by two centuries and was once a rich and powerful centre of trade and commerce but was now a desolate ruin, deserted by all humanity except a few stray tourists.

'How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become', we read.

We weren't alone. In the distance but always in sight were Syria's secret police, nervous about the movements of two English clergymen who were off the beaten track. And I wondered how long this beautiful country could be kept under such tight control. And I feared for its future.

About six years later, once great Syrian cities whose names we have grown to know – Aleppo, Homs and even much of Damascus lie in ruins, devastated by violence, destroyed by bombs, torn apart by hatred.

Syrian cities are not alone: sisters in suffering with Palestine's Gaza, Irak's Mosul, and even Ukraine's Donetsk. As we embark on the remembrance of Europe's killing fields and the war that engulfed so many of the peoples of the world and spread beyond our lands to Africa and the Middle East, we do so in the shadow of other dark and terrible conflicts across the world.

As we remember the outbreak of a conflict that began a sort of civil war in Europe, claiming the lives of millions of people over 30 years and causing Europe twice to descend into hell with – what my grandmother used to call as short lull long enough for her to raise a family that would fight in the second round beginning in 1939: as we commemorate these conflicts of the past our responsibility is to do so in a way that speaks a word to the world about the perils of war, about the way to peace and about that which the President of Ireland, who visited Coventry Cathedral recently, called the long 'road of a lasting and creative reconciliation'.

Remembering the Past

In this great collegiate church, 'the spiritual home' of The Royal Warwickshire Regiment, our thoughts are inevitably and properly on the exceptional contribution and enormous sacrifices of the Regiment to the war effort and safety of the realm.

30 battalions raised from Warwickshire is a staggering sign of the readiness of the people of this county to serve their country in time of great need. The eleven and a half thousand men who died and the countless others injured in the horrendous battles of Ypres, the Somme, Gallipoli and other fields of carnage is a frightening figure of the sacrifices paid by a generation lost to or maimed by conflict.

The names of 452 of these brave young men who came from Warwick are inscribed on the War Memorial of this town. The other 11,000 are written in the memorials and Churches of most other towns and villages of this county – and we think especially of the terrible price paid by the people of Bedworth.

As we look back to the past of 100 years ago, our eyes cannot fail to alight on the tragic deaths of young local men in war in more recent times. The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, the successor to the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, suffered terribly in Afghanistan. There was one battle that cost at least five lives and, with great respect, I mention them now. Forgive me if there are some brave people I have missed:

- Colour Sergeant Philip Newman
- Lance Corporal James Fullarton
- Sergeant Simon Valentine
- Fusilier Louis Carter
- Fusilier Shaun Bush

And, among the fallen, from the Parachute Regiment, was Conrad Lewis; and I believe our most recent fatality from our county was the former pupil of Warwick School, Private Joe Whittaker, a reservist in the same Regiment, only 20 years old.

I was involved in the funerals of some of these young men. The memory etched on my mind is the women they left behind: girlfriends, wives, sisters, daughter and mothers.

Of course, many courageous women soldiers have fought bravely in Afghanistan and other wars, and died courageously and they have left grieving menfolk, but it the women left behind in recent wars and past wars that have moved me deeply as I have thought about these commemorations of the First World War that we begin today.

Perhaps this is because my generation grew up under the watchful eyes of – as we called them – our spinster aunts whose sweethearts were wrenched from them by war and who never returned leaving them to face life alone and, for my aunts at least, destined for a life in service. The women whose sad eyes spoke out like the widowed city in our first reading: 'Is there any sorrow like my sorrow?' (Lamentations 1.12).

Perhaps it is because I have been captivated over recent months by the writings of Vera Brittain, mother of Baroness Shirley Williams, who recounts so powerfully the agony of seeing a generation lost to war and, indeed, whose poem, 'Perhaps', so poignantly mourns the loss not only of the man with whom she was desperately in love and also her beloved brother and another close friend:

Perhaps some day the sun will shine again

And I shall see that skies are blue,
And feel once more I do not live in vain,
Although bereft of you.

Perhaps it is because I have a hope that the suffering of women will bring sense to the decision makers of the world, in the way that a letter in *The Times* from a Northern Irish woman put it on Friday.

Maybe [in the Middle East] when the fathers of both sides can imagine how it is for the other side's mothers to see their children die, they will find the courage to let of their national pride and come together to find a diplomatic solution.

The City of Peace

I began with images of cities destroyed by war. I end with the image of a city built in peace of which we heard in our second reading.

A city where 'God himself will be with us, and will wipe every tear from our eyes for death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the first things have passed away' (Revelation 21.3-4).

How can the world find a way from the city of destruction to the city of peace?

Nearly 74 years ago, people throughout Warwickshire saw Coventry burn.

Amidst the horror of war, the death and destruction of conflict, the chaos of emotions that swirl around our minds and communities when we are hurt and damaged, a lonely priest stood among the rubble and spoke *a word to a world* at war in his time that remains a word to the world still plagued by war in our time.

- † A word that says we cannot allow people to remain in a permanent state of hatred in which fellow human beings, especially neighbors in the same continent, are enemies.
- † A word that says that recrimination, revenge and retaliation are, in the end, self-defeating and that the only way out of the terror of war is the 'road of a lasting and creative reconciliation'.
- † A word that is encapsulated in two words that a Jewish man – Jesus Christ – who suffered terribly at the hands of his own people and of other people, 'Father Forgive'.

'Father forgive': forgive us all for the pride, envy, hatred and violence that leads eventually to slaughter of our soldiers and condemns civilians to appalling suffering.

That simple prayer was said across Germany on Friday in centres of the Cross of Nails inspired by the Coventry story as they remembered the declaration of war between Germany and Russia on 1st August 1914 that led, inexorably, to our own declaration of war on 4th August. It was said in Coventry Cathedral at exactly the same time.

May the reconciliation that has taken place between the countries of Britain and Germany and all those we used to call our enemies be a word to the world today that brothers – and sisters – can live together in peace.

And may we have for ever in remembrance those who laid down their lives for the cause of peace.