

**A Sermon Preached by the Bishop of Coventry, Christopher
Cocksworth
at St Stephen's, Würzburg on 15th March 2015
during the 70th Anniversary Commemorations of the
Destruction of Würzburg**

Sermon Text: John 6.46-51

Introduction

Dear friends, it is a very great honour to be invited to Würzburg during the 70th Anniversary of its terrible destruction. It is a special joy to preach here at St Stephen's Church – a church badly damaged in the firestorm of that dreadful night.

I was in Dresden a month ago, joining the city, the country and, indeed, the whole of Europe, including, of course, Great Britain, to remember the tragedy of 13-14 February 1945. I was there with the Archbishop of Canterbury who spoke in the Ceremony of Remembrance in Dresden's Frauenkirche, shortly before President Gauck gave his own moving address. The Archbishop said, 'as a follower of Jesus I stand here among you with a profound feeling of regret and deep sorrow'.

Like the Archbishop in Dresden, I come to Würzburg 'as a follower of Jesus [who] stands among you with a profound feeling of regret and deep sorrow' at the suffering our countries caused each other during both world wars, including the appalling destruction of Würzburg and the deaths of so many of its people – those who lived here and those who sought safety here as refugees.

In Dresden a few years ago I met former President Richard von Weizsäcker. With so many others, I was saddened by his recent death. He was a great friend of Coventry. The Peace Bell which he gave to Coventry Cathedral in 1990 as a gift from the German nation, and which we ring before every service, will be a permanent reminder of him. On the same occasion the Queen Mother presented him with a Cross of Nails. As President he gave many fine speeches. Among them were his words to the German Parliament in Bonn in 1985: 'Those who close their eyes to the past will remain blind regarding the future . . . Anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present'.

How do we, *as followers of Jesus*, open our eyes to the past and how do we, *as followers of Jesus*, see the present and look to the future?

Dear friends, to answer that question, we must find an answer to three other questions.

First, who is this Jesus that we follow?

Second, what does this Jesus whom we follow do?

And third, what does this Jesus whom we follow require of us?

Who is Jesus?

In our reading, St John gives us a clear answer to our first question: 'who is Jesus?'

Jesus is 'the bread of life'. Jesus is the one who gives life to the world.

'All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people' (John 1.3), so John tells us at the beginning of his gospel. God's word is life. God's word is life-giving. God's word became flesh in Jesus and dwells among us giving us life.

All that, perhaps, sounds a little abstract. But Jesus is not abstract. Jesus is life. Life is real and actual and concrete. Life is breath and movement. Life is feeling and thinking. Life is joy. Life is love. Life is lived together.

Jesus brings life. So he calls himself bread. Bread nourishes and sustains us. Bread gives life. Jesus is our bread: the bread we need for life; the bread that feeds us; the bread that brings life to our bodies, our minds, our spirits. Jesus is the bread that we share: the bread that gives you life and that gives me life; the bread that we eat together.

And if all that still sounds a little too abstract, Jesus places bread in our hands and says, 'Here I am for you', *'Take, eat'*.

'I am the living bread', says Jesus, the living bread 'that comes down from heaven', 'so that one may eat of it and not die'. Jesus is living, eternal bread. He does not just give something to help us, he gives himself to live in us, for ever.

What does Jesus do?

I have already begun to answer our second question, 'what does Jesus do?' Bread is to be eaten. Jesus gives himself to us as the bread of life to give us life. But the way Jesus gives life to us is by giving himself over to death for us: 'the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh'.

The history of Europe and bombing of Würzburg tell us that human beings are experts at causing death. If today we should think that humanity has left that history behind we need look no further than Iraq, Syria, Nigeria and South Sudan; at IS, at Assad, at Boko Haram and, in case we begin to feel superior in Europe, at the Ukraine, at Russian-British-French-German-American military prowess.

Jesus does not ignore our preoccupation with death by speaking easy promises of life. He goes to the place of our death. He bears the sin of our violence. He becomes the victim of religious hatred and political intrigue. He suffers and dies 'at the hands of' – as we say in the Church of England's Collect for Good Friday – 'wicked men', and of course, there are wicked women who seek violence as well.

The only way to defeat human death is by divine life.
The only way to defeat the causes of human death in sin and evil is by overcoming them with God's greater power of goodness and love.

Jesus gives his life for the life of the world.

What does Jesus require of us?

If Jesus is the bread of life and if Jesus gives his life for us, what does he require of us?

'Very truly', Jesus says, 'I tell you, whoever *believes* has eternal life' (John 6.47).

In one way, Jesus requires very little of us: simply to believe. To believe that Jesus is the bread of life who gives us life because he has given his life for the life of the world.

But to believe that Jesus is life and that he has given his life for us on the cross and shares his life with us now requires everything of us.

There is a hymn about the cross that Christians throughout Britain sing, especially as Holy Week approaches. It is called, 'When I survey the wondrous Cross'. It ends with these two lines:

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Recently I have been reading again, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship* in which he says, '*only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes*'.

To truly believe that Jesus is the bread of life who gives himself on the cross for the life of the world is to take up one's cross, and follow him (Matthew 16.24).

Years before I had heard of Bonhoeffer, I was taught to sing a simple Christian song:

'Trust and obey, there's no other way,
to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey'.

What does it mean to believe and, in believing, to obey?

So, dear friends, our three questions about Jesus have left us with one question about ourselves. What does it mean to believe that Jesus Christ is the bread of life and, in believing, to obey, to follow?

The story of the bombing of my own Cathedral in 1940 gives me four clues to answer that question.

Provost Dick Howard, the lead priest of the Cathedral, tried to save it from destruction. The fires were too great for him and for the city's firemen. They saw it burn and collapse.

The next morning Dick Howard stood in the ruins of the Cathedral. His hands were dirty with the debris of destruction but he held them open to the God of life. His heart was heavy with sadness but he opened it to the hope of the gospel. He placed his faith in the God of resurrection and in the power of God's love. And he believed that as a sign of God's resurrection power and love, a new Cathedral would be built. In the midst of the death of the world, he believed in the life that Jesus brings.

With an open heart to God, Dick Howard was able to have an honest voice and speak a prayer that became part of the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation that is now prayed across the world, including here in Würzburg. It is simply, 'Father, forgive'. It is not the exact prayer of Jesus from the cross, 'Father, *forgive them*' – because only Jesus, the one without sin, can pray that prayer. It is simply, 'Father, forgive'. Forgive us all, for we are all bound up in the sin of the world. We all bear responsibility.

With an open heart and honest voice, Dick Howard's arms were wide. In a sermon from the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, which was broadcast by the BBC on Christmas Day 1940, he said that we must find a way to reach out to our enemies with arms of friendship. He called on city and country not to seek revenge but to find reconciliation.

With an open heart and honest voice and wide arms, he had willing hands to – in the words of the same Christmas sermon – 'build a kinder, more Christ-child-like world'.

Jesus said, 'I am the living bread' (John 6.51), 'for the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' (John 6.33).

'Sir', they said, 'give us this bread always' (John 6.34).