

## **Sermon given by Bishop Christopher at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche, Berlin on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2018**

### *Introduction: Greetings from Coventry!*

It is a great honour to be invited to preach at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche, especially on this solemn evening. I come to you with many of the curates of my diocese who are visiting centres of the Cross of Nails in Berlin. We bring you greetings in Christ from our Diocese of Coventry.

As you know, there is a special connection between our Cathedral in Coventry and the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche: a solidarity in suffering and a shared hope for a new and better world. And I am glad to be with you on this day.

### *Day of Penance – Night of Remembering*

As I prepared for this service was conscious that the Day of Penance in Berlin is followed the next day by the memory of a terrible night of bombing on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1943.

I was also conscious that very recently Europe was commemorating the end of the First World War and remembering the 20 million people who died as a result of that war. In Coventry we stood with our friends from Dresden and Kiel to mourn the young lives lost to us all, and to pray for peace.

And, as I prepared this service, I was also conscious that last week Coventry was remembering another terrible night in November when, on 14<sup>th</sup> November, Coventry experienced its worst night of bombing, bombing which destroyed its magnificent Cathedral.

This is why I chose our reading about the crucifixion of Jesus for this service on the Day of Penance. Perhaps you know the Coventry story. The morning after the destruction of our Cathedral and many other buildings, and the loss of hundreds of lives, the Provost of Coventry Cathedral – Dick Howard – made Jesus' prayer from the cross the prayer of Coventry: 'Father, forgive'. Actually, it was a shortened version of Jesus' prayer. Not, 'Father, forgive *them*, for they know not what they do'. But simply, 'Father, forgive'.

For the Provost, only Jesus can say, 'Father, forgive *them*' because only Jesus – as the criminal on the cross saw – 'has done nothing wrong'. The rest of us have done much wrong and we have been damaged by the wrongs that others have done. Provost Howard

recognized that we are all bound together in a common web of sin. Your sin damages me and makes me sin more. And my sin damages you and makes you sin more.

'Father, forgive': this was my prayer of penance when we commemorated the end of the first world war and remembered the carnage of the previous years.

'Father, forgive': this was my prayer of penance when we commemorated the bombing of Coventry and the destruction of our Cathedral.

'Father, forgive': this will be my prayer of penance tomorrow as Berlin commemorates one especially terrible night of destruction.

Father, forgive all of us for our sins, sins that cause each other to sin, sins that devastate the world.

### *Condemned Justly*

Sin is corporate: we all share a common responsibility for the sin of the world. But because sin is corporate it is also individual and personal. The sin of the world is my sin and, therefore, I must face its reality in my own life, and take personal responsibility for my sin, for my share in the sin of the world. That is what happened to one of the criminals crucified next to Jesus. He accepted that he had done wrong, and done wrong badly – that he was condemned justly, that he was getting what he deserved.

At the same time, he could see that Jesus was condemned unjustly, that Jesus had done nothing wrong. And he could see that somehow Jesus had resisted the cycle of sin. He could see that Jesus, even in the agony of his unjust death, would not let himself be corrupted by the sin of others. For even in the midst of his murder, Jesus was able to say, 'Father forgive them'.

He could see that here in the worst of human experiences, God's forgiveness could be found. And he reached out for it: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'.

### *Icon of Judgement and Love*

I have a little chapel where I live. The chapel has two icons made by a priest in the Diocese. One icon is of Mary, Jesus' mother. She is looking towards the icon on the other wall – an icon of Christ – and she is gesturing towards him: 'Don't look at me, look at him'. Then, as you do as she says, and look at the icon of Jesus, you find that Jesus is looking at you.

I often kneel before this icon, and I pray the very simple prayer from the Orthodox tradition, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner'. I was kneeling before this icon, saying that prayer, while I was preparing this sermon. And I thought about a conversation I had in Cambridge with two German Lutheran theologians.

I said to them, 'Sometimes I think that my continual need, as a sinner, for the mercy of God, shows that my Christianity does not really work. I have been following Christ for so long. How can I still be so much of a sinner?'

They replied, 'No, it is exactly the opposite of what you have thought. Your prayer is proof that Christianity works. It is the mercy of God that has brought you to the place of seeking God's mercy. The mercy of God enables you to recognize your need of God's mercy. The mercy of God shows you that God is merciful, and gives you the faith to trust in God's mercy. And the mercy of God is so merciful that it patiently does its work, one degree at a time, to transform you from a sinner to a saint.'

### *Conclusion: the Gaze of Grace*

I was given these icons just over a year ago. The priest who made them returned a little while afterwards to make a slight change to one of the eyes of Christ. 'The two eyes of Christ', she said, 'should be different'. One should be an eye of love. The other, an eye of judgement. At the moment they are too similar'. As you can imagine, I was a little reluctant for her to make this change, because I liked the way both eyes were very loving.

As I knelt before the icon after she had finished her work, the icon of Christ had changed. As I looked at one eye, I could see that it was an eye of love. As I looked at the other eye, I could see that it was slightly sharper, and I could see the judgement in the eye. But there was still a kindness in the eye, a look not to condemn but to make better. And, as I looked at the face, the two eyes of Christ came together to look at me with one undivided gaze: a gaze of grace. Jesus looked at me, saw my sins and loved me still.

There is a patience in his gaze, the patience of grace: a patient grace. A grace that patiently, graciously, gives me time to turn fully to the Christ who laid down his life for me on the cross, and continues to pray for in heaven, saying, 'Father, forgive him'. A patient grace that allows me to say both, 'I am justly judged a sinner' and 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'. An amazing grace that saves a sinner.