

ADDRESS *from* COVENTRY CATHEDRAL *given in* NIJMEGEN

EVENT	The Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Bombing of Nijmegen
SPEAKER	The Very Reverend John Witcombe, Dean of Coventry
DATE	22 February 2014

Thank you very much for your invitation to speak here today. I have been reading the history of your beautiful city and I have been immensely moved by the terrible events of 1944. In that year the citizens of Nijmegen were the subject of aerial bombardment and ground warfare, and I am sure you will still bear scars from that time. Without a doubt you have a story to tell which other need to hear, just as we do in Coventry.

I have been Dean of Coventry since January 2013, and I bring you greetings from your friends in Coventry today. The city of Coventry was subject to one of the earliest intense aerial bombardments of the Second World War on November 14th, 1940. For over eleven hours, bombs and then incendiaries rained down on the city, and the medieval cathedral was burned. The following morning, my predecessor Provost Dick Howard walked into the smouldering ruins and set the pattern for the future character of the cathedral, and the city around it. He set it first by his promise to rebuild, as a sign of hope, of a future beyond unimaginable destruction. And secondly he set it by his commitment to peace and reconciliation, of turning enemies into friends. He believed that everyone bore the blame for the destruction that happened, and before he left the cathedral many years later he had the words 'Father Forgive' inscribed on the old cathedral wall, behind the altar - a prayer of repentance and forgiveness for all people.

In the ruins and fallen stones of the cathedral back in 1940, two of the charred roof beams had fallen into a cross shape, and were taken and tied together to form a cross which still stands in our cathedral today - a vivid reminder of the fire that raged through Coventry on that terrible night. And on the floor were many of the long medieval nails which had fallen out of the burning timbers - a local priest took three of these and made these also into a cross, the first Coventry Cross of Nails. This cross, which came to speak so powerfully of the presence of Christ right in the midst of destruction, has become a symbol which binds together an international network of over 160 centres those whose stories have been touched by conflict or destruction, but who have overcome this to give themselves to the service of peace.

The present priorities of the Community of the Cross of Nails are these:

- Healing the Wounds of History
- Learning to live with difference and to Celebrate Diversity
- Building a Culture of Peace

We do this through:

1. Refusing to give up hope. With God's help, we do not believe that destruction and conflict can ever be the last word in the world. Our cathedral, burnt in 1940, was rebuilt and consecrated in 1962. It took many years, but it happened. We share with you this commitment to keeping hope alive for a better future.
2. Refusing to point the finger of blame. With God's help, we recognise the part we all play in conflict and destruction, and commit ourselves to a better future. In Coventry we share every single day at 12 noon in the cathedral's Litany of Reconciliation, a prayer of repentance and commitment which we share with our partners across the world. The refrain in the Litany is 'Father Forgive' – the words inscribed on the ruined cathedral wall.

3. Building relationship, by getting to know those who had been our enemies, by listening to one another's stories, by finding ways to work together. The first visit from Coventry to Germany took place in 1947: invitation came from Oberburgomaster of Kiel for a mission of friendship to go from Coventry to that city, which had also suffered great destruction in the war. Coventry sent the Mayor, a trades union official, and the Provost to represent the churches. They were presented with a cross of nails, and we received 'the Kiel stone of forgiveness'.

Because of our history and our buildings, we are now delighted to welcome visitors from near and far who come to work through difference, and to learn how to be peace builders. The remains of our ruined cathedral and the glories of the new cathedral alongside provide the context for these conversations to take place, and help our visitors to make their own commitment to the work of peace.

Here in Nijmegen, you too can inspire new generations of people to be peace builders, by sharing your story and your rebuilt city with those who come. You too are a symbol of hope triumphing over despair, and peace triumphing over conflict. By welcoming myself and my American friends here this weekend, you send a sign that the world can be changed, that relationships can be renewed. We are deeply sorry for the destruction wrought in this city through the months of 1944, and we are grateful for the opportunity to stand shoulder to shoulder with you today to make our shared commitment to a world in which these things no longer happen, to a world of peace.

May God bless you in this endeavour, and use us all in building peace for all.