The story of the Cross of Nails

Coventry is famous worldwide for being the city of peace and reconciliation. The story of Coventry is a story of reconciliation. As we look at the importance of loving one another despite difference, we return to the story of the Cross of Nails.

On the night of the 14th November 1940, 515 German bombers carried out an attack on Coventry that was codenamed Moonlight Sonata. The attack was intended to destroy Coventry's industrial infrastructure including munition and aviation factories crucial to the war effort. At 7.20pm the first bombs fell, not long after the air raid siren was sounded. The bombs destroyed water supplies, telephone lines, gas and electricity. Fire fighters struggled to get through the streets due craters in the roads. At 8pm Coventry Cathedral was hit and flames soon engulfed the building. Bombs continued to fall, with the attack reaching its climax at midnight. Over the course of the night the Luftwaffe dropped 500 tons of high explosives, 30,000 incendiaries and 50 landmines. The all clear was not given until 6am in the morning.

In the morning the extent of the damage could be assessed. More than 43,000 homes, just over half the city's housing stock was damaged or destroyed. The official death toll was 554 but the real figure could be higher as many people were unaccounted for (and the exact figure has never been precisely confirmed). A further 863 were severely injured. The extent of the damage was so great that Nazi propaganda coined a new word, 'coventrieren', meaning to annihilate a city.

Coventry Cathedral was in ruins. Yet, hope emerged from the ashes. The cathedral stonemason, Jock Forbes, noticed that two of the cathedral's charred roof timbers had fallen in the shape of a cross. He bound them together and placed them on an altar of rubble in the cathedral. The vicar of nearby church, St Mark's, the Rev'd Arthur Wales, fashioned together three of the medieval nails that had fallen from the roof. This became the first Cross of Nails. Reminded of another day of darkness, when Jesus was nailed to the cross, Provost Richard Howard took some chalk and wrote 'Father Forgive' on the charred walls of the cathedral. It is significant he wrote only two words, he did not write 'Father Forgive Them.' He wanted everyone to recognize their own part in the destructive patterns of behaviors which can lead to disaster. Provost Howard also wanted to make a commitment not to seek revenge but to strive for reconciliation with the enemy – a view very different to the media and government messages at the time.

On Christmas Day 1940, the BBC broadcast their Christmas service from the ruins of Coventry Cathedral. Provost Howard further highlighted the need for reconciliation. He stated that after the war we should work with our enemies to "to build a kinder, more Christ-like world."

The Cross of Nails quickly became a sign of hope, friendship and reconciliation. In September 1947, only just over two years after the end of the war, a Cross of Nails was

presented to St Nikolai Church, Kiel, Germany. Over subsequent years hundreds of crosses of nails have been gifted to churches, charities and organizations committed to peace and reconciliation. In 1976 recipients of the Cross of Nails formed an ecumenical 'Community of the Cross of Nails' (CCN).

The Community of the Cross of Nails has three residing principles; healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity, and building a culture of peace. Members of the CCN regularly pray the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation (written by Canon Joseph Poole in 1958), which is prayed in Coventry Cathedral every weekday at noon:

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,

Father forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,

Father, forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,

Father, forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,

Father, forgive.

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,

Father, forgive.

The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children,

Father, forgive.

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,

Father, forgive.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.