

INTRODUCTION

[Thanks for the welcome]

Last week the Dean spoke on Sacrificing War, and on the almost impossibly great challenge to the church, to us as Christians, to see the world in more than national terms, to see the conflicts and traumas of the world drawn into the vortex of the Cross, and to find something higher and truer than war. He said “and this is the gospel”. But then he went on to speak of the instinct of nations to give fire for fire, and to live out a belief in war, sacrificing the promises of the Kingdom one by one.

In January I was in western Kenya, in the city of Eldoret, where the post election fighting took place. I went into the IDP camps and met with those who had suffered, and those who caused suffering, was surrounded by the bleak despair of a people who thought Kenya was different, and then found themselves engaging in ethnic cleansing and looking with desire at genocide. And there were two Bishops. The Roman Catholic Bishop Corir, a Kalenjin by ethnicity, filled his compound with 9,000 Kikuyu fleeing the pangas and guns of the Kalenjin warriors. And they came to his gate and said “hand over the cockroaches” (appalling echo of the words used in Rwanda), and he knelt and opened his arms and said, “my brothers, you will first have to kill me”. They left.

But another Bishop, not to be named, turned from an elderly Kikuyu woman fleeing her pursuers, and then as she held him he let them beat her half to death. I met her in the camp.

So what makes the difference? What do we do when our leaders take us into wars, with which we may or may not agree, but whichever, they take us in on the assumption that this must be right and good and the highest truth?

Last week the Dean spoke of Coventry, where I was Sub Dean until moving to Liverpool last December, and where I ran the international mediation and reconciliation work, travelling to partner peace centres in Africa and the middle east, and working on structure of reconciliation and programmes of recovery from civil conflicts.

He told of the Cathedral, bombed in November 1940, rebuilt in 1962 with the ruins left and the new Cathedral alongside, its west wall glass, so you look from the high altar through into the ruined mediaeval cathedral, a visual drama of death and resurrection. But not an obvious one in 1940. On the morning after the bombing the Dean, Richard Howard, in the still smouldering ruins, with the smoke of a blitzed city around, took a piece of burned wood from the fallen roof and wrote “Father forgive” behind the ruined high altar, and 6 weeks later, on Christmas Day 1940, the grimmest Christmas of the 20th century for the British, on the BBC preached on the need for reconciliation with Germany.

He too found a truth truer than war, and his actions then and later laid the ground work for a worldwide ministry of reconciliation.

And we say, so it should be. This is what churches do. We ARE a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, we the church, surpass mere nationalism, and speak the gospel prophetically to nations. That is what we should do. Except, so often it does not look that way. Perhaps, we might say it hardly ever seems that way. On one hand we inherit the baggage of 2,000 years of Christian history, and in the UK that is seriously overweight baggage.

Last December I was installed as Dean of Liverpool (not Liverpool cathedral, much grander) Selected by who knows what system, appointed to a post that I not only had not applied for but did not even know was vacant, by a letter from the Primer Minister supplemented by Letters Patent of the Crown, welcomed by fanfares, choirs, Lord

Lieutenant, High Sheriffs, big titles, and a very big building. All to tell me that I must be very important, and God forbid I ever believe it. It was the establishment at play, making someone a member of the club, like the Masons. Castrating the institution's challenge with social acceptance. The holy nation?

On the other we have all the divisions and differences and power plays and competition that the church produces.

A major UK newspaper last year began an op ed peace on the state of the churches with the headline, "See how these Christians hate one another ". If in doubt about a leader's views on almost anything, especially sex, create a new church.

And if that is true, what can we say to the world that finds the truth of war the truest truth, the sacrifice of war more compelling than the cross, the fury of war more convincing than forgiveness and reconciliation, the brutality of war more satisfying than the complexities of co-existence/ Our prophetic cutting edge is blunted by the church being a reconciled people deeply divided.

The readings seem so different, so much better, full of grandeur and glory, but look more closely:

The disciples are asked to trust a peasant about to die, as the way, the truth and the life. To be believers which in John is a strong word of commitment, not of intellectual assent. The communities to which this gospel was sent were to wash feet, love one another and accept rejection and death, because of this man. And they are told such belief brings understanding, knowledge, and direction.

The churches to whom Peter writes are small, fearing the onset of persecution, struggling with the overwhelming impact of their culture, doubting the uniqueness of the revelation of God in Christ. No triumphalism here.

This glorious revelation of Christ in glory is seen by a small crowd engaged in the lynching of an insignificant and by now blood covered man outside a Roman Provincial city. Think Fallujah or Basra.

But in each reading there is an unveiling of something, a revelation that changes perspective and alters identity. This bloodied lynch victim is following the Galilean peasant and see God's reality of eternal hope and ultimate meaning. Lost if he had held on to what was around him, he succeeds to the last degree when he lets go of everything.

Cardinal van Thuan, then Archbishop of Saigon, was arrested in Saigon in 1974 after the communist take over, taken from the street, stripped and given only a number. In his Lent retreat for the Curia in 2000, he spoke of that beginning to 13 years in prison, 9 in solitary, tortured, yet converting his torturers, alone yet persuading a guard to give him enough rice wine to celebrate the mass every day with one grain of rice and enough wine for the palm of one hand. Powerless and without identity, yet transforming a prison and threatening the government. Converting many, training and ordaining two to keep going the church he founded. I met him 4 years ago, and spent an afternoon with him. He spoke of Jesus, of prayer, of forgiveness and of the goodness and grace of God. Of how, as they stripped him he sensed God's voice saying "now you have only me", and that was enough.

That is what Jesus is saying to Philip, "I am the way", there is no need for more.

Easier said than done we feel; in Nembe, a town in the Niger Delta, I spent a night in what was described as a hotel (don't think Marriott), while drunk, armed men patrolled outside. The militia leader in that swamp surrounded place of misery had already threatened to kill us, and dialling 911 would not help. I confess that I was reluctant to be killed, not heroic, rather hoping for a chance to see the family again. But celebrating communion alone in a stinking bedroom, there was the grace of God,

and the sense that although nobody would know what had happened, and this was not very glorious at all as a way to die, in God's hands I still had permanence and significance. He was there and that made the difference.

The clashes and divisions that mar the Christian body and impede our capacity to speak the truer truth of the gospel in a world at war, come in part from our search for significance and permanence, as individuals and as church institutions. To have permanence and significance we seek power, and that means conflict with others on the same hunt. That sense of significance is the aim of the fol de rol at my installation, of the poor imitation of Gilbert and Sullivan. Van Thuans's real significance lay in letting go of what could be seen, like Stephen. The churches of Asia Minor, to whom Peter writes find their permanence and significance not in buildings and hierarchies, but in faith in Christ the cornerstone, and thus in their corporate life in worship and flourishing as they feast on Christ. Supremely in John's gospel, glory is the Cross and Resurrection. Jesus significance comes from His obedience to the father, His supreme self giving, the truest truth.

Where we make the conscious effort to renew worship and prayer, to base our importance only in Christ, through our fellowship, our mutual up building love, the church does not turn inward and become quietistic, but receiving the grace of reconciliation is driven outwards and becomes a flourishing and overflowing reconciler.

Look at the church in South Africa, and Tutu's words when the discussion of gay rights came up, "I have not overthrown one tyranny to create another". No-one is safe from his prophetic witness, but it is a witness based in the life and power and grace of Christ, never compromised by mere human loyalties to race or country.

The radicality of the Christian gospel is the demand that by abandoning what is visible, we find all hope and life and transformation of ourselves and our society, in what is invisible, in the person and truth of the Crucified God.

Said here, said at the National cathedral in Washington, at Westminster Abbey, surrounded by the pomp and circumstance of state, said to Kings and Presidents, it might all sound absurd

And yet it is true. The Galilean peasant in the upper room man was the saviour, and is for us. The martyr's death inspired millions. The scattered small communities ended up more powerful and more enduring than the Empire that threatened them. And God has not changed.