

## Bishop Ruth's - Sermon for Candlemas, Wells Cathedral

2 January 2025

15 months ago I was sent to Coventry. Literally rather than figuratively! I am really grateful for those of you who kept contact and kept me in your prayers. Thank you! And thank you for the welcome home this evening! It is very special to feel you belong somewhere.

It has been a significant year or so for me, one which has taught me much about the value of relationships, the cost of ministry and the goodness of God. I hope that I continue to learn more of what that all means in the days to come.

Today we celebrate the feast of Candlemas, here in Wells Cathedral. What a magnificent place to be remembering the presentation of Christ in another grand building, the Temple. A moment when his parents, by tradition, gave thanks for a new arrival and showed their gratitude for the preservation of his mother. A moment which we now recognise as one where we leave behind the season of Christmas and head towards Calvary. Turning from the crib to the cross.

Christmas marks the revelation of God to us, his people, through the incarnation. God becoming a babe in a cradle, he came to 'share the same things' as us, as the Hebrews reading speaks, flesh and blood. And now we look towards the purpose of that revelation, to the ministry of reconciliation, which is to be found in his death on the cross to redeem the world, where we have the opportunity to become reconciled with both God and one another.

This past year I have spent significant time in another of our great Cathedrals. Coventry could not be more different from Wells. Chalk and cheese! Here in Wells we have the scissor arches, the ancient clock, and architecture which lends itself to the filming of historical drama.

And yet Coventry Cathedral has also featured recently in a drama series but one depicting a much more modern era of the 1970s and 80s, the period of ska and two-tone music which originated in Coventry and Birmingham. 'This Town' featured the Cathedral, a place chosen for a clandestine meeting of two of the characters, a place which they decided on, because as they remark, 'no one goes there and no one knows where it is'! And yet it is there that one of them has a revelation of sorts, discovering Coventry Cathedral to be 'God's auditorium'.

The reality today is that many visit this extraordinary Cathedral from around the world due to its story. One which illustrates the meaning of reconciliation and speaks loudly of the possibility of change and renewal. The buildings themselves express something of the new, rising from the ashes of the old.

On Christmas day 2023 a few weeks after joining the diocese, I was presented with this pectoral cross I now wear. It is known as the Cross of Nails and is worn by Bishops and Cathedral clergy and is a sign of the ministry to which we all have been called, one of costly service.

It was a Christmas Day in 1940 that Provost Howard spoke to the nation following the destruction of Coventry's old Cathedral during heavy bombing, six weeks before. He declared that when the war was over, we should work with those who had been enemies 'to build a kinder, more Christ Child-like world.'

The new Cathedral was dedicated in 1962 from where you can look out upon the old ruin from which came two significant remnants, which stand today within the new. A cross made from two charred roof beams and the cross of nails made from three medieval roof nails.

The cross of nails has become a symbol for a world-wide community of reconciliation based on three principles.

- Healing the wounds of history
- Learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity
- Building a culture of justice and peace.

I've found myself reflecting a lot on what those three principles mean for me over this past year. And in recent weeks, what they mean for us as the Church. We cannot just allow them to remain as words of intention but rather something that we are willing to enact even at cost to ourselves.

For Coventry healing the wounds of history meant recognising not only the damage inflicted upon themselves but that which we, as a nation, had inflicted on Germany. In this week when we remember the liberation of Auschwitz, when we see the release of hostages in the Israel/Gaza conflict, the innocent lives lost there and in Ukraine and other parts of the world, how might we bring healing to a broken world?

In the Church of England, we can see that we are also broken, that the structures of what we have known are crumbling, just as the physical walls of the Temple began to fall of old. What should this teach us about our life and witness as Christians?

We are only just beginning to face the realities of the harm and further damage we have inflicted upon those abused. When will we move from mere words of shame to restorative acts of healing? How will we own our part and bring about change?

As a nurse I learnt that deep wounds don't just heal by placing a plaster over them but often by a painful process of granulation. Chronic wounds indicate poor blood circulation or a weak immune system. As a Church we need to attend to our structures and culture. To break down what is unhealthy and rebuild upon the firm foundation of the Christ we follow.



We need to change. We need to acknowledge the brokenness of our systems and ways of behaving so that we can truly live in love and faith with one another. How can we do that when we fail to value those who are different from us? How can we reflect the love and mercy of Christ when we defer to power? How will we become more Christ-like in the way we operate as a Church and as individual Christians?

It requires us to recognise our failure, our sin and repent. God's self-giving in the person of Christ is both our model and our means. His acceptance of the child in the midst, the last and the least amongst us, reminds us how we can embody that same Spirit.

Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple as an act of faith, bringing with them sacrifices of thanksgiving. Simeon and Anna were witnesses to that act. They had been waiting a long time. A reminder to us all that you are never too old to glimpse the gift of God. Just as you are never too young be one!

Simeon saw with his own eyes the revelation of God in this small child. Anna found her voice in praise and had to speak of the goodness of God. (I can hear the echoes of our Zambian brothers and sisters as I speak... 'God is good...all the time...'). They resonate with the words of that wonderful song which for the past 6 months have been an ear worm in my head... 'all my life you have been faithful, and I will sing of the goodness of God'.

There must have been moments in the intervening years when Mary wondered if that was so. After all she would have those words of Simeon ringing in her ears... 'a sword will pierce your own soul too' as she watched her son die upon the cross. Hers was a costly ministry, as was Jesus' himself.

Today we too are invited to present ourselves in this place of worship as those willing to engage in costly service and ministry. Called to share in the sufferings of Christ, carrying the scars and wounds of His love.

It will challenge us. It will cost us. It will change us. Are you willing?