

Talk - Sunday 10th November 2019

“Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” (Luke 20:38)

The medieval church building of St Michael's Cathedral in Coventry was bombed in November 1940, leaving only a burned-out shell, with the walls and the tower standing around a chaos of rubble and destruction. The leader of the cathedral at the time, Provost Dick Howard, was determined that this terrible event should become an opportunity to remind people of the futility of war and God's power to forgive. He immediately committed the cathedral to be rebuilt as a sign of hope and peace. In 1962 the modern cathedral was opened. Rather than building over the ruins, however, the new building complements and stands alongside them. The whole site is a journey. The memorial to destruction represents Christ's crucifixion, from where we journey towards the hope of resurrection and his triumphant return. This is symbolised in the soaring windows and the extraordinary tapestry, Christ in Glory, which serves as the focus of the new building. Visitors and worshippers alike are able to connect with their honest experience of the world, but in a context of hope and future glory, which many people find profoundly moving.

Jesus has been heading towards Jerusalem and is now approaching the climactic conclusion of his ministry. Here, in the Temple, he is challenged about his understanding of the scriptures. He turns the question on its head, using it as an opportunity both to reaffirm his own standing with God and also to underscore the hope which God offers all those who trust in God for salvation.

The theologically conservative Sadducees try to show Jesus up as being illogical, so he explains that the age to come, when salvation will be complete, is quite different to this present experience. Our present, limited relationships will be transcended by a place in which all relationships will be perfected and we will be at one with each other. Jesus then moves on to underline the truth of resurrection, using the Sadducees' preferred method, drawing on Old Testament Law.

When the Lord spoke to Moses at the burning bush, Moses may well have wondered who was speaking – and so God refers to the patriarchs, describing them in the present tense – that is, as still alive. It would be meaningless, of course, for God to be God of the dead, so Jesus uses this as a way of proving resurrection. At the same time, perhaps, he is drawing a parallel between himself and the patriarchs.

Jesus thus reaffirms his own standing in the biblical tradition and his excellence as a rabbi, while at the same time refuting the doubt cast by the Sadducees on the resurrection, offering encouragement to those who seek to share his belief.

At Remembrance tide, our minds are filled with images of those who have died. We recently celebrated All Souls' Day and All Saints' Day, and this weekend we are

particularly thinking of those who have died in war, whether as civilians or as military personnel.

Today's readings help us to search for hope in resurrection in the midst of the chaotic destruction of war, when it can be hard to distinguish right from wrong – with both sides typically claiming to have God on their side. There is, in truth, little sense to be made out of the ghastly images of the First World War, or the shocking images of current conflicts on our television screens, which so often seem to be “proxy” wars for other countries. However, we are assured by scripture that God has not abandoned us, or any of those caught up in war.

In Coventry, the work on reconciliation, rooted in the response to the destruction of 1940, has recently been summarised in three priorities: healing the wounds of history; learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity; and building a culture of peace. In the conflicts in our own lives and in the wider world, we are challenged to be honest yet hopeful, searching for God's healing and for the hope of resurrection, even in the darkest times.

In rebuilding Coventry Cathedral after the bombing of 1940, it was decided to build the new building alongside the ruins of the old, rather than replacing them. This preserves the memory, alongside the renewal of hope.

Jesus' authority is challenged by the Sadducees, casting doubt on the hope of resurrection.

Jesus refutes the Sadducees on their own terms, showing from scripture why resurrection is a reasonable belief, and encouraging us also to believe.

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