

Father, Forgive

By the same author
The Vicar of Baghdad
Faith under Fire
Suffer the Children
Iraq: Searching for Hope

ANDREW WHITE

Father, Forgive

REFLECTIONS ON PEACEMAKING

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To Justin and Caroline Welby

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Foreword

Andrew White is one of those people that I boast of having met, and even more so boast of having worked with. He is one of the most unusual characters currently within the Church of England, defying the accusation that all ordained clergy now fit into a single mould and are without character or eccentricity.

In the eighteenth century Andrew would have been a pirate or a privateer. He has the extraordinary capacity to sail the seas of conflict, coming alongside those involved in causing and delivering violence – especially around the issues of religion – and capturing them for the cause of peace. To do this he breaks most of the rules in any book of health and safety, personal protection, and bureaucratic process.

His previous books have set out some of the stories around which he has worked. *Father, Forgive* goes back to the extraordinary events of November 1940, in which another holy pirate, the Very Reverend Dick Howard, the then provost of Coventry Cathedral, went into the ruined building after the night of the first great air raid

on the city of Coventry and wrote on the wall with a piece of burnt wood: “Father, forgive”.

As Andrew sets out in this book that particular incident was the origin of a great movement of peace, which, under his successors, and those responsible for Coventry’s reconciliation ministry, has led to the establishment of not far short of 200 peace centres around the world, and one of the great symbols of reconciliation. To this day, the impact of taking people to Coventry to participate in its Litany of Reconciliation, around which this book is structured, is dramatic and at times overwhelming.

Andrew is a reconciler but he never compromises with the truth of the gospel and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In the conclusion to this book he talks about two great commands: “Forgive, forgive, forgive”, and “Love, love, love”. Perhaps one of the origins of his enormous impact on those he meets is that these are genuinely the ways in which he works. He inspires forgiveness and demonstrates love, both in word and above all in action.

The Christian faith is based on the reconciliation of human beings with God through the self-giving love of Jesus. But for far too many of us that reality does not sufficiently inspire action. Andrew is one who is constantly seeking to turn reconciliation into a lived out reality. To do that he takes huge risks, and yet the risks are taken in faith with immense determination and intelligence.

The book is controversial. There will be things in it that inspire most of us. Equally, some may disagree with something he says, but nobody can disagree with the commitment and passion with which it is written, and like all important spiritual leaders, even where there is disagreement there is also the capacity to provoke new thought, fresh imagination, and a desire to see beyond what is humanly possible to those things that are possible only with God.

The work of Coventry Cathedral continues, and Andrew is only one in a line of extraordinary individuals who have been responsible for its impact. Many have been characterized by this holy piracy, often worrying to oversee, but always deeply committed to the cause of Christ and the work of the kingdom. May the passion of this book guide our own walk with Him.

*Justin Welby,
Archbishop of Canterbury*

Preface

The Coventry Litany of Reconciliation

In this book I examine the wide-ranging and frequently challenging subject of reconciliation in the light of the statements set out in the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation. The Litany is loosely based on the “Seven Deadly Sins” – each of which describes an aspect of the condition of the human heart and each of which is easily identifiable as a cause of conflict in human relations. Ultimately, the Litany helps us to cut through the complex geopolitical, religious and relational quagmires that exist and get to the heart of the issue. Simply, we are all in need of reconciliation.

In *Father, Forgive* I also attempt to tackle perhaps the greatest reconciliation needed in Christianity – namely, the way in which we have dealt with the Jewish people for over 2,000 years.

But my purpose is not just to look at conflict at an international level. We must also examine our hearts as individuals. What are our own needs for personal reconciliation – not only with God but with one another?

As we come to look at reconciliation, we see that it is all to do with forgiveness. Forgiveness is the most important thing in life, since it is the only thing that can prevent the pain of the past from determining our future. So, while we look at each aspect of the Litany, remember that, in the end, forgiveness is the key to unlocking the most complex of situations.

*Canon Andrew White,
Baghdad, December 2012*

The Litany of Reconciliation

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.

From Coventry to Baghdad

At the very heart of my work is the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation is not an isolated event, but a continuing process; a journey. It something that cannot quickly be conjured up, but requires immense patience and nurture.

For many years now my efforts have been very much focused on and in the Middle East. This journey began for me back when I was preparing for ordination at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. I found myself being drawn into helping to restore the broken relationships between the Jews and Christians among the students at Cambridge (a story that is told in depth in *The Vicar of Baghdad*). At that time a seed was planted and from small beginnings

something began to grow.

In 1998 I was appointed Director of the International Centre for Reconciliation, based at Coventry Cathedral, one of the foremost centres for reconciliation in the world. It was from here that I found myself working at an international level to help bring about reconciliation between nations and between their political leaders. The role of Coventry Cathedral in reconciliation is truly exceptional and is worth considering. It began in a remarkable way, 58 years before I arrived there.

It was the night of 14 November 1940 and the Second World War was well under way. To date, no cities had been destroyed by bombing, but on this night things changed. The City of Coventry, in the heart of England, was devastated. Such was the extent of the carnage that it gave rise to the expression “Coventried” – meaning to be totally destroyed.

The air raid was carried out by 515 German bombers and was code-named Operation *Mondscheinsonate* (Moonlight Sonata). Its purpose was to destroy Coventry’s factories and industrial infrastructure, but the damage to the city and its residential dwellings and monuments went far beyond this. Around 4,000 homes were destroyed and the majority of Coventry’s buildings sustained some damage.

Along with this destruction came the total obliteration of its medieval Cathedral of St Michael. At around 8 p.m. it was set on fire for the first time. Volunteer fire-fighters

managed to put out the fire, but other direct hits followed and soon new fires in the Cathedral, accelerated by an internal firestorm, were out of control. A direct hit on the fire brigade headquarters disrupted the fire service's command and control, making it difficult to send fire-fighters to tackle this and the many other blazes in buildings around the city. Soon the Cathedral, named after an archangel and great protector, was no more.

Standing in the midst of the still-smouldering rubble the next morning, the Cathedral's leader at the time, Provost Dick Howard, took a piece of chalk and wrote on the sanctuary wall, "FATHER, FORGIVE".

People noticed that he was writing the words of our Lord from the cross. He did not write the entire phrase that Jesus spoke, however: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Some wondered why the rest of the words were missing. The answer was simple: we *all* need forgiveness, not just those who had committed such an atrocity. Howard had therefore distilled the essence of Jesus' words and written the repeating heartbeat of what would become Coventry's Litany of Reconciliation. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God... We also need to be forgiven," said the Provost.

At the time he didn't realize how profound and prophetic his statement would prove to be. He was giving birth to an amazing ministry that would reach the ends of the earth; a pre-eminent centre for reconciliation. Howard's response, in calling for forgiveness instead of

revenge, would make the ruins and the new modernist cathedral that would eventually rise up beside them, an emblem of reconciliation around the world.

A few days after the bombing, one of the Cathedral staff was standing in the ruins when he noticed, lying amongst the rubble, the large medieval nails that had held the roof together. He took three of the nails and bound them together. This gave birth to what became known as the Coventry Cross of Nails. Today one can find hundreds of centres around the world using the cross of nails as a symbol of reconciliation. In our own church, St George's in Baghdad, a cross of nails stands on the altar, embedded in a piece of the bombed stone wall from the former Cathedral. Each time I see this cross it reminds me that reconciliation is about mending that which is broken. Iraq is broken and here we are working towards its restoration. All day, every day, we are working for reconciliation.

* * *

Until I went to Coventry in 1998, much of the reconciliation work of the Cathedral had focused on those who had, at one time, been in conflict with the UK. To this day, for instance, the relationship between Coventry and Dresden in Germany is outstanding. Britain led a major attack on that city in 1945, during the final few months of the Second World War. In four raids between 13 and 15 February, 722 British heavy bombers and 527

United States Army Air Force bombers dropped more than 3,900 tonnes of explosives on the city, resulting in a firestorm that destroyed fifteen square miles of the city centre and caused around 25,000 deaths. Much like Coventry, the city's cathedral, the Dresden Frauenkirche, was destroyed.

A report at the time said that the raids also destroyed 24 banks, 26 insurance buildings, 31 stores and retail houses, 640 shops, 64 warehouses, 2 market halls, 31 large hotels, 26 public houses, 63 administrative buildings, 3 theatres, 18 cinemas, 11 churches, 6 chapels, 5 other cultural buildings, 19 hospitals (including auxiliary, overflow hospitals and private clinics), 39 schools, 5 consulates, the zoo, the waterworks, the railways and 19 postal facilities.

It was often said that Dresden was destroyed in retaliation for Coventry, but the reality is that despite the severity of Coventry's destruction, it did not compare to the devastation of Dresden.

In the 1960s a group of young people went from Coventry to help to rebuild the Deaconess Hospital in Dresden, which had been destroyed by British bombs. Then a group of young people from Dresden came to Coventry to help build the city's first International Centre of Reconciliation. Many years after that terrible night when the Frauenkirche was destroyed, the son of a former bomber pilot who had been a part of the raid, fashioned the cross and orb that crowned the top of this

great church, restored over half a century later. Here was reconciliation in practice. The huge cross and orb stood in the nave of Coventry Cathedral before it was finally taken to Dresden.

I will never forget the great day when we handed over this incredible cross and orb. We were at the front of the church with hundreds of thousands watching as the Bishop of Coventry and the Cathedral Canons shared in the great ceremony led by HRH the Duke of Kent. With me was my predecessor as International Director at Coventry Cathedral, Canon Paul Oestreicher, who had spent a lifetime working for British–German reconciliation. Canon Paul was awarded the Order of Merit of the State of Saxony for his wonderful work of reconciliation. The links between these two cities are now so strong that whenever one is mentioned, the other comes to mind.

Although the relationship between Coventry and Dresden is quite unique, I have visited many places around the world that have been significantly affected by Coventry as a centre of reconciliation. The Coventry story, through the Cross of Nails ministry, has played a key role in so many other "histories", providing a beacon of hope for peace and reconciliation. For us here in Iraq, the Cross of Nails travelled to this land long before St George's was reopened in 2003. Since then, another cross has been sent here from Coventry, which was presented by Dean John Irvine to a group of our

young people from Baghdad who were visiting England.

As I sit down and meet with political, tribal and religious leaders here in Baghdad, I often think to myself that it is only because of the tragedy in Coventry that I am here. All my reconciliation work in Iraq today has its foundation in the terrible night of 14 November 1940 in Coventry.

Through it I am reminded of the very foundation of our Christian faith – the miracle of resurrection; that out of death and destruction can come life, hope and a future. With Jesus we never give in, because from resurrection comes reconciliation. At the heart of Christ's resurrection was the restoration of the relationship between the Almighty and humanity – a point that St Paul makes clear in 2 Corinthians 5:16–21:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that

in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Reconciliation is central to Christian ministry. We are a new creation if we are in Christ, and through Him, God has reconciled Himself to us and, in turn, given us the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation is about mending that which is broken – restoring relationships to all that they were intended to be. Verse 19 makes clear that the work of reconciliation is not finished. Through His death and resurrection, Christ is still working to unite humanity with His Heavenly Father – and He accomplishes that work through us.

I don't believe that this is a ministry just for some, a special few. God has called all of us to continue the work of reconciling and restoring broken relationships at every level. It is an integral part of our remit as His ambassadors and representatives on earth. To be an ambassador is a critical and highly responsible role, since you represent your Head of State. Engaging with the British Ambassador here in Iraq is part of my daily work. The speed-dial button on my telephone simply reads "HMA" (Her Majesty's Ambassador) – in other words, the person who represents the Queen. If we take seriously what St Paul says, then we are all His Majesty's Ambassadors of Reconciliation.

The phrase "Father, forgive" is such a challenging one, and yet so essential for us to both understand and practise. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and forgive

those who hurt us. This is a radical, counter-cultural statement. Love is reconciliation in practice, because there can be no reconciliation without forgiveness. Jesus instructs us to love and forgive those who cause us pain – and healing from the pain of the past can only issue forth from forgiveness.

The biggest obstacle we have to overcome in our work of reconciliation is the people who refuse to forgive. So many wars are based simply on individuals' inability or unwillingness to forgive. If there is no forgiveness, then pain, hurt, bitterness and anger incubate in the human soul. So often, in reconciliation talks, I am presented with a long list of the hurts that the other party has caused to that person, people-group or nation. Stored-up pain causes immense conflict and division.

Yet, the principle of "Father, forgive" provides a way out of this trap. As Jesus taught us, forgiveness is the key that unlocks so much potential in the Christian life. Forgiveness releases people who are trapped in the past to become all they were intended to be, now in the present and in the future. If hope can arise from situations as terrible as Coventry and Dresden, then it can arise for each of us. Out of pain and even death can come healing and reconciliation. Three nails wrought into a cross – forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. We are indeed privileged to serve Christ in the ministry of resurrection.

We All Need Restoration

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

As we begin to think about the need for and practice of reconciliation, we do so by recognizing that, ultimately, we all need to be reconciled to God. We all begin our life journeys from the same position – one of being inadequate in our relationship with the Almighty. Fundamental reconciliation happens when our relationship with God is restored and we become followers and lovers of Jesus. We all need to know God and love Him.

Central to our faith is John 3:3: "no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." This passage is all about reconciliation. The deepest need of