

Read the Archbishop's speech at the Four Corners Festival in Belfast this evening.

As prepared for delivery.

It is an honour to be here, to be part of this festival. But nobody told me when I agreed to do this that I'd be following the Pope. His Holiness is a tough act to follow, to put it mildly. I am privileged to call him a friend and brother.

The Holy Father has a passion for reconciliation, by which I mean for enabling people to disagree well, to relish the vast and beautiful diversity of our humanity while loving one another and living in peace. A few years ago, we hosted a retreat at the Vatican for leaders of South Sudan with the Pope and the former Moderator of the Church of Scotland. These are churches that have been separated for half a millennium. South Sudan is a country that has been torn apart by violence, by war, by conflict.

And on that retreat, something miraculous happened. Well actually, many miraculous things happened, and I will mention two. The first was the profound sense that God was present, and that meant that these leaders could not just speak to each other as fellow human beings but truly see each other as fellow human beings – people just like them who knew suffering, grief and loss, who were deeply affected by the events of the last decade.

And the second miraculous, astonishing thing was something Pope Francis did at the end of this retreat. He got on his knees, and he begged the leaders of South Sudan to make peace. And the journey of peace took on a new dimension. For peace requires risk and sacrifice.

Peace sometimes seems totally unattainable – whether it's a war, or a familial conflict, or even within yourself. You may have seen so many attempts at peace that you have given up hope it can ever happen. But we believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and so death and evil is overcome and we are invited to live a resurrection life. We can believe in finding peace, in disagreeing well and seeking the abundant life and flourishing of all. We must take risks and make sacrifices for such peace.

We can see that resurrection life in the witness of people who have themselves made the long and painful journey from enemy to friend, a people who have allowed themselves to be living stones, built into a different and new community.

If there is anyone who knows this, if there is any community who has walked this journey and made the hard choices of forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation, it is here on the island of Ireland. There remain, of course, huge challenges but the people of Northern Ireland have begun hesitantly to walk together. With enormous courage you offer us this gift of witness to the God who can turn any dead end into a turning point.

It is for the people of Northern Ireland to witness to your experience, rather than for me to tell you about reconciliation – many people in this city will remember the devastation of conflict and will have far more to tell me than I have to tell you about the fragile flower of peace. Given the audience, I do not presume to instruct, but to encourage. First with some examples of reconciliation and secondly with some of the principles I

draw.

Years ago, I worked as the Canon for Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral. You may know the story of the Cathedral: it was bombed during World War Two. In the following days and weeks, powerful symbols emerged from the ruins. Two burnt roof beams – which had fallen in the shape of a cross in the rubble – were bound together and placed where the altar had been. Three medieval roof nails were formed into a cross, which became the original Cross of Nails. The words ‘Father Forgive’ were written on the wall of the ruined chancel. Some wondered whether it meant “Father, forgive them”: the enemy who had bombed their city, ended lives, and destroyed livelihoods. But the Cathedral Provost reminded them of the Epistle to the Romans: “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

At Christmas, six weeks later, he vowed that when the war ended, they would work with those who had once been enemies to ‘rebuild a kinder, more Christ child-like world’. They took the thousands of nails strewn over the floor of the Cathedral and turned them into crosses. After the Second World War they took these crosses to Germany, to Japan, and to Italy – and then as the years went by, they took them around the world as symbols of reconciliation. There are some in Northern Ireland, at Lagan College for example.

Since then, the new Coventry Cathedral, rebuilt next to the ruins has continued this legacy and become a centre for peace-making and reconciliation around the world. The partnerships that emerged from the war became the international Community of the Cross of Nails, which continues to grow globally.

And it was there, in Coventry Cathedral, that I met one of the guides, an elderly man, who had told me about his experience that dark night in World War 2 – the night the Cathedral was bombed and his brother killed.

He said to me – ‘a couple of days ago I saw three people standing outside the west screen, and they kept coming towards the door and moving away. Two women and a man. And eventually we asked them in. They looked hesitant, but they came in and they wandered around. The man came up to me and said “I need to tell you something. I have been to Coventry once before, but I was in a bomber. I am German and I was above the city.”

The guide told me his first, instinctive reaction was to clench his fist. But he thought to himself ‘I have spent 20 years telling this story, I am not going to give up now.’

And he said, ‘I forgive’. He wasn’t even sure if he meant it, but once he has said it, he knew it was true.

In small actions and choices, made by individuals, like Provost Dick Howard or the guide at Coventry Cathedral, we see Jesus. He may be seen by almost no one else, but it’s a step towards His kingdom.

That is how reconciliation is often done, not by swashbuckling figures on the street or by grandiose acts, but by people who look like Jesus: a figure that you could have walked past in the street and not looked twice at. A baby born, and if you were just a few streets away you wouldn't even realise that God had just landed on this world.

God coming to us in Jesus meant that he became part of conflict and scarring and struggle and pain. And so the reconciler must be someone who shares in pain. Reconciliation means risk and sacrifice.

I think of my friend Bishop Desire. I first met him when I was working here and I went to see him in Goma in the DR Congo. The was under siege at the time and he took me to a refugee camp within the area where he worked. There were about 250,000 refugees in the region at the time. It showed the consequences of conflict. And as I walked with him, I was overwhelmed, and said "How do you find resilience to deal with this?".

He said to me: "We do what God gives us the resources to do, and the rest we leave to God". We can only do what we can do. It's not helped by overreach or guilt or a sense of failure that we have not solved the world's problems.

Desire used to go up into the militia areas and hold football competitions bringing together teams of young men, child soldiers, who were working with the militias from opposite sides. They played football in the morning, then they were given lunch and taught about Christian faith. In the afternoon he gave them a course on peacebuilding. The girls were trained and taught by Claudaline, his wife.

Bishop Desire died of Covid caught on one of those trips. He is dearly missed by many, including myself. But the impact he had, and continues to have on countless lives, shows what one person can achieve when we do what God gives us to do, and leave Him with the rest.

Bishop Desire also reminds us that reconciliation is done by the people who have experienced conflict. It can't be imposed by outsiders, or forced upon you. The people who have been hurt, who have been wounded and deeply scarred by conflict are the people who have to make peace. It takes risk and sacrifice.

Many years ago I travelled to Burundi, in Bujumbura, just after the end of the civil war. It was still very, very tense with lots of fighting going on up in the hills. I was invited to facilitate a three-day conference of rebel and government military and political leaders on reconciliation.

On the third day of the meeting – by which time people had stopped being polite and started to say what they really meant - a man in one part of the room pointed across the room. He said 'In the war that man led a militia that killed 30,000 people. How can I forgive him? How can I be reconciled?'

And I looked out of the window across Lake Tanganyika, while trying to think of what to say. I pointed out to the lake, and I said to him 'If you go out in a boat on the lake and you fall out of the boat what do you do?' He replied: 'I swim'.

I said 'If you don't swim what happens?' And he said 'Well, I drown'. I said 'Well, if you don't reconcile you will slaughter each other'.

The only thing that is riskier more sacrificial than reconciliation is continued conflict, violent or subdued.

We have looked at the role of the individual, and communities, in resolving conflict. But conflict happens at all levels of society, from the individual, to families, to communities, to countries, to the whole world.

The conflict of climate change, our hot war with creation, is playing out at every possible level. It is already affecting individuals in the poorest and most marginalised communities, destroying lives and livelihoods, driving forced migration and competition for ever scarcer resources. It is affecting communities and countries - in places like Mali, farmer-herder conflicts tend to revolve around limited access to livestock corridors. The same is true in Nigeria.

Climate change is certainly a direct cause of some conflict, but it is also one of the greatest foundations of conflict. It is a solid basis on which hatred and fear can fester, the sense of scarcity that means one of us has to lose if the other is to win dominates. Climate change is an intensifier: It intensifies weather events - flooding, droughts, heatwaves, storms. It intensifies the suffering of the most vulnerable people who are impacted.

And what happens to people when they are suffering, when they have run out of food and water, when they cannot sustain themselves of their livelihoods? They move. And where there are large movements of people, there is conflict.

An often-used figure, estimated by Professor Norman Myers of Oxford University and cited by the IPCC and Stern Review is that there will be 200 million climate migrants by 2050. Last year I was in Rome, at a preparatory meeting of faith leaders at the Vatican ahead of COP26, and the Head of the IPCC said that that updated figure was now probably nearer 800 million at our present rate.

To put that in context, we have 82 million roughly forcibly displaced in the world today^[1]. At the end of the greatest war in human history in 1945 it was roughly 20-25 million^[2].

800 million - even 200 million - is unimaginable. It will totally change our world.

Climate change is a significant force multiplier. Human security risks spill over into other higher order national and international security threats. Even if it is 'just' 200 million who are directly affected and forced to move by climate change, where they move to will be occupied and there will be struggles. So at a geo-political level, whatever else one says about what is happening in this world it is clear that there will be political instability, intra-state and inter-state tensions, threats to critical infrastructure, and significant unpredictability in food and water supplies. We already see some of the impact of this on the Nile – a source of life for several hundred million people.

Ultimately, climate change is a conflict that will consume the whole world, if we do not reconcile now, to our neighbours and to our planet. We are called to rediscover that sense of belonging to the whole of humanity, to reject the fallacy of atomisation, the idea that I can do what I like without affecting anyone else.

It's easy to feel hopeless in the face of such massive problems. Yet you have faced the same and this Festival alone speaks of risk taking and sacrifice making. Northern Ireland can testify to change, can share success and failure, setback and advance and in so doing can both advance itself and enable others to travel along with it.

But where do we start with such sharing? I suggest first with who we are, with identity. Identity is complicated, in individual or community. You know that.

When I worked as Dean of Liverpool Cathedral, the first question I was asked was “are you red or blue”? Are you a supporter of Liverpool or Everton? When one asked the question back the answer would be “x, my family has always been x”. So often our identities set us apart, and we define ourselves in contrast to others.

The 20th century showed the danger of identity defined by race, Aryan, or not Jewish or Slav, Romany, Gay, or ability, not with a disability, not with Downs and so on.

What Jesus does is give us a new identity. It is who we are really called to be. It overcomes the identities we create, seek or have imposed on us by heredity, genetics, history or mere sin.

‘But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.’^[3]

Whenever we are tempted to draw lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’, Jesus can always also be found on the other side. God calls us together into community – the people Peter writes to are living in Asia Minor, likely oppressed, likely marginalised, with little social status. And Peter teaches them how to look at themselves and others - not through the lenses of power, status, race, heritage, nationality or wealth but through the loving eyes of God.

So maybe that’s where we can start together – by reaffirming where we find our identity, as beloved children of God, called to ‘declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvellous light’. We still have an identity, but it is built on rock of God’s all seeing wisdom, not the sands of our shifting fears and desires. It is identity that opens the door to hope through the myriad identities of those around us, whom we

learn to love.

And what does that look like in practice when it comes to building communities that love across difference, that transform violence into understanding? There is more than can be said in this time.

That is my second principle to share.

- First, seek identity in gift, grace and positivity, not in negation and enemies.
- Second, embrace complexity. No conflict is simple, no peace building happens without setbacks, failures, risks and sacrifice. It is always complicated.
- Third, be patient and persistent. Peace and forgiveness are the work of decades, generations of fitful improvement. They will come, resilience matters, but there are no quick fixes.

And what are the habits of peace building? The reconciliation team, based at Lambeth Palace have written something called The Difference Course.

It is a 5 session course, lasting about an hour and a half each session, which looks at different aspects of conflict and talks about 3 'habits':

1) be curious - developing a truly empathetic world-view perspective of our competitors, our challengers, our adversaries, our enemies. Curiosity opens us to their humanity. It risks us seeing them not as a category, but as people. It causes us to seek their identity.

2) the need to be present - the ability to encounter and listen to those who might mean us harm. Presence says stick with it, listen and experience what they feel. Don't circle the wagons and seek a safe place excluding all who do not agree with you. That risks understanding that they may not be entirely wrong.

3) and the ability to reimagine - making change possible together, and with that to deliver sustainable peace. Reimagining conflict, at any level from family to international, so as to see how to disagree well takes a whole community. It will always lead to sacrifice, and to abundant and mutual flourishing life.

This Festival is very much these habits in action – calling people to new places, to meet new people and hear new perspectives and to respond with presence and curiosity.

To return to Coventry Cathedral - it I has one of my favourite pictures, the Stalingrad Madonna. It was drawn on paper in charcoal on Christmas Day 1942, 80 years ago, by a German medical officer under siege from the advancing Russian armies near Stalingrad.

It shows Mary huddled against the terrible cold, holding Jesus, sheltered, to her cheek. The Christ child shivers in darkness, threatened by death, surrounded by hatred and conflict. And yet around Mary are the words “Licht, leben, Liebe”. Light, Life, love.

This fragile child is God’s answer to the power of war, to the darkness of sin, to the threat of death. This baby is the cornerstone of peace, the foundation of reconciliation, the promise of hope and life.

In the infant Jesus, the power and presence of God is truly revealed. In a world where we cry out ‘have mercy, we want peace’, the Christ-child responds today ‘Have hope. Here is peace’.

In Colombia in 2010, an advertising agency came up with a unique Christmas campaign. Not the sort we might think of, a John Lewis advert on the TV, but one to bring home guerrilla fighters, living in the jungle and separated from their families for many years.

They decorated trees with Christmas lights and added a message: “If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home. Demobilize. At Christmas, everything is possible.”

If God can come to us, we can always turn to Him. He can bring peace out of violence. He offers light amid the darkness.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ said Jesus, ‘for they will be called the children of God’. As the children of God – which is all of us, no matter who we are or where we’re from – our calling is to pursue the peace of God who reconciles us to ourselves, to him, to one another and to our world.

[1] <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html>

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/world/refugees-record-un.html>

[3] **I Peter 2:9-11**

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