Coventry Cathedral Reconciliation Season All Saints

Revelation 7: 9-end Matthew 5: 1-12

The Courage to Remain

For well over a decade, at this time of year, I have found myself climbing an olive tree somewhere in the West Bank. Taking part in the annual olive harvest has been one of the privileges and joys of my work at Embrace the Middle East. At Embrace we work with an organisation, who exist to support Palestinian farmers who risk losing their land to military zoning or settlement expansion. Their moto is "keep hope alive" and I have that wording on both a hoodie and a key ring. It reminds me on a daily basis that keeping hope alive requires courage and tenacity and so it with this in mind that I want to spend a few minutes unpacking today's readings.

The golden thread that runs through both of today's readings is steadfastness or, in other words, the courage to remain. In Arabic that concept is known as صُمُود samoud. How do we keep hope alive when our world gives us countless reasons to give up? How do we continue to love, to pray, to forgive, to seek justice, when cynicism seems so much easier? These are the same questions that were faced by the first Christians to whom the Book of Revelation was written. Despite what popular culture has sometimes made it, Revelation is not a coded prediction of future events. It's a letter of hope written to communities living under pressure from an empire that demanded total loyalty and perhaps wondering whether following Christ was worth the cost. They may have been tempted to compromise, to withdraw and to stop believing that God was still at work.

It’s into this uncertainty that John offers a vision. He lifts their eyes beyond the immediate present and invites them to see reality from heaven's perspective. "I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." It is one of the most breathtaking images in scripture. The Roman Empire demanded hegemony and John’s vision offers a sharp contrast that has resonance in our own time. Not one nation, ethnicity or political tribe. In other words not one version of humanity. It’s a diverse multitude gathered together before the throne of God. It’s what we, as part of the Community of the Cross of Nails are called to work for when we pledge to learn to live with difference and celebrate diversity.

The temptation, however, is to imagine that this vision somehow belongs only to the future. That one-day God will magically resolve all our differences and heal all our divisions, and until then there is little for us to do except wait. But that’s not how Revelation works. John's visions are primarily about how we live now. They invite us to inhabit God's future in our present. To begin living today in the light of what we know will ultimately be true. And that is where the Beatitudes come in.

If Revelation gives us a vision of where God is leading creation, the Beatitudes show us the kind of people who help bring that future into being. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are not the people our world usually celebrates. The world is currently dominated by men who want to appear successful, powerful, strong, certain and in control. Yet Jesus begins somewhere very different. He begins with people who know their need of God. People whose hearts

have been broken open by grief, people who recognise that the world is not yet as it should be and so refuse to make peace with injustice.

The Beatitudes are not a list of virtues that earn God's approval. They are a description of what life looks like when people remain open to God in the midst of a fractured world. That takes courage. It takes courage to mourn in a culture that encourages distraction. It takes courage to hunger for righteousness in a world that repeatedly tells us that only strong, powerful domination has the power to change anything – and then only for the chosen few. It takes courage to be merciful when harshness and indeed cruelty seems to be the order of the day. It takes courage to become a peacemaker when conflict rages all around us.

I think the word ‘peacemaker’ deserves a little attention as we begin this series on reconciliation. Jesus doesn’t say, "Blessed are the peace-lovers." Nor does he say, "Blessed are the peacekeepers." He says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." There’s a difference. Keeping the peace can sometimes mean avoiding difficult conversations and suppressing disagreement. It can mean allowing injustice to continue unchallenged because confrontation feels uncomfortable. Making peace is something else entirely. Making peace requires courage and honesty. It requires truth-telling and a willingness to remain present when every instinct tells us to walk away.

The model for this is not found in human diplomacy but in God. The entire story of salvation history is a story of a God who refuses to abandon the people God loves. Again and again humanity turns away and relationships fracture. Again and again violence enters the story and yet again and again God remains faithful even when that faithfulness leads to a cross. The

Christian story is, at its heart, the story of a God who has the steadfastness to remain in relationship with a wounded and wayward humanity.

If we are to be agents of reconciliation, then we are called to embody something of that same steadfast love. I think that is one of the reasons I find olive trees so compelling. Olive trees do not grow quickly. They refuse to be rushed. Some of the trees I have harvested from are hundreds of years old and they have endured droughts, empires, wars, occupations and political upheaval. Generations have sat beneath their boughs and harvested from their branches. Still they remain and they represent a deep wisdom in that.

Much of our culture is obsessed with speed. We want instant solutions, immediate results and quick fixes. But reconciliation rarely works like that. Trust takes time to build and wounds take time to heal. The work of reconciliation is often slow, patient and hidden. It requires the courage to stay at the table, and the courage to listen. The courage to acknowledge harm and to be changed by an encounter with somebody whose experience of the world is very different from our own.

That is why All Saints' Day is such an appropriate moment to begin our Reconciliation Season. The saints are people who knew a thing or two about courage, steadfastness and hope. They were not perfect people, despite the church occasionally portraying them that way. Take the saints whose stories are told in our scriptures. The bible is refreshingly honest about their human frailty. Peter was impulsive and Thomas doubted. Mary Magdalene was deeply troubled and Paul was argumentative and often grumpy. The saints are not people who got everything right, but they are people who kept showing up. People who kept putting one foot in front of

the other and remaining faithful even when certainty eluded them. The saints are people who trust that God is at work even when they can't immediately see the evidence.

When we think of the saints, we may often think of those whose images are depicted in stained glass or remembered in Butler's Lives of the Saints. But if Revelation teaches us anything, it is that God's understanding of sainthood is far more expansive than ours. A multitude that no one can count. Ordinary women and men who are known and unknown. Some celebrated and some forgotten. People who prayed, served, loved forgave and who, often in the most extraordinary circumstances, kept hope alive.

I suspect most of us can name some of those saints in our own lives. Someone who believed in us, or a friend who stayed when others left. Someone whose prayers somehow held us together when we didn't know how or what to pray. Someone who had the tenacity to remain with us when we were trying to run away from ourselves.

That is the invitation of both our readings today. Not that we try to become heroes believing that that we can save the world through the force of our own determination, but that we become people who root ourselves ever more deeply in the life of God. People whose hope is sustained by deep trust, rather than wishful thinking. Deep trust leads to steadfast hope and it is that conviction that enables us to remain in places where peace feels elusive and where reconciliation feels painfully slow or even impossible.

We can remain because we know that the final chapter of the story has already been revealed. A great multitude from every tribe and language and people and nation standing together before the throne of God. Not because

human beings finally solved all their problems but because God's love proved stronger than all that sought to divide us.

As we begin this journey together over the coming weeks, the challenge before us is not the difficulty of working for reconciliation. We already know that it’s hard. The challenge is whether we are willing to remain long enough for God's reconciling work to take root within us. The saints remind us that holiness is not found in perfection but in perseverance. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is still at work drawing all things towards that great multitude we glimpse in Revelation; a reconciled humanity gathered before the throne, every tear wiped away, every wound healed, every division overcome by love. Until then, our calling is simple, though never easy – to have the courage to remain and keep hope alive. Amen.