

Good Friday Tenebrae  
Isaiah 52:13-53:12  
Passion According to St. John  
April 19, 2019  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The choir of Notre Dame sang its last anthem during the distribution of Holy Communion at Palm Sunday Mass, the day before the Great Fire of 2019 consumed two-thirds of that magnificent cathedral's roof and sent the spire crashing through the attic onto the stone vaulting over the sanctuary. The music was classical, a piece called the Stabat Mater, about Mary standing at the foot of Jesus' cross. It's in Latin, but the first line translated is: "The grieving mother stood weeping beside the cross where her Son was hanging...." You can go to U-Tube and watch the choir singing in that Gothic sanctuary encased in stained glass. It's breathtaking to see the backdrop of the more-than-life-size sculpture of the Pieta, the grieving mother holding the dead body of her crucified Son. Knowing what happened the next day makes the sight almost excruciating. Who knows? Happily oblivious to what lay ahead, the singers' minds may have been fast-forwarding to Easter Sunday and the alleluias they had already rehearsed. Little did they know that Good Friday would arrive early this year and last longer than a day.

You've probably seen post-fire photos of the sanctuary of Notre Dame, with that altarpiece still in place, the image of Mary's arms raised in grief and dead Jesus draped in cold marble across her lap, Mother and Son presiding over that rubble-strewn sacred space. While in England recently, I heard about another sanctuary tragically ruined -- not accidentally, but deliberately.

Those of you old enough to remember World War II will certainly remember the bombing of Coventry, England, and the decimation of its cathedral. Coventry was an industrialized city with a munitions factory, so it was fair game for bombing strikes during the Blitz. The worst was the night of November 14 through 15, 1940. 500 war planes dropped 500 tons of explosives. The 14<sup>th</sup>

century Cathedral Church of St. Michael took many direct hits and had caught fire about 8 p.m. By 11 p.m. the cathedral staff and firefighters had to stand back and watch it burn because their water supply had run dry. The burnt-out hull of the cathedral, roof gone, glass shattered, rubble piled high, walls barely standing, became the iconic image of Coventry's devastation.

The next morning, cinders still warm underfoot, the Anglican bishop stood in the midst of that ruined sanctuary and prayed a very powerful two-word prayer: "**Father, forgive.**" If you go to Coventry today, stand in the shell of that building and see a cross made of two charred wooden beams standing on the open-air altar. The cross is inscribed with two words: "**Father, forgive.**" History repeats itself: remember the steel beams standing in the shape of a cross at Ground Zero? After the 1940 bombing, the Coventry Cathedral stonemason found 2 beams lying in the shape of a cross and tied them together. They became the Charred Cross standing on that altar.

One of Coventry's modern ministries is an International Centre of Reconciliation. There are over 330 members of its International Network of Communities of the Cross of Nails. In the days following the WW II bombing, members of the cathedral family found scads of medieval masonry nails in the rubble. Glue three of those nails together and you have a cross. Coventry nail crosses are treasured. After the end of WW II, the cathedral community sent crosses of nails and an invitation to reconciliation to over 300 churches around the world. Initially, only one responded: a church in Germany.

We heard the Passion according to St. Luke this past weekend. In it, Jesus says, "*Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.*" (Luke 23:34) When Jesus says, "Forgive **them,**" I take that to mean **all of us**, not just the religious leaders who orchestrated his execution or the Romans who cooperated and carried it out. The bishop of Coventry spoke wisely when he said, "**Father, forgive.**" He pointedly **didn't** say, "Father, forgive the other guys, forgive the

Luftwaffe, forgive the enemy.” He simply said, “Father, forgive,” because in war there’s more than enough blame to go around, there’s blood on everyone’s hands, and forgiveness is needed in all quarters. (War historians tells us that the firebombing of Dresden, which killed so many civilians and destroyed so much of that lovely German city, including its beautiful cathedral, the Mariankirche, recently rededicated, was at least partially in retaliation for the Blitz bombings.)

Tonight’s lesson from Isaiah says:

*Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases...  
...he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed...  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

Isaiah 53:4-6

**“Father, forgive” us for our** failures in love, great and small, that hold us captive and require the ransom Your Son has paid with His life. The folks at Coventry speak of **vertical** and **horizontal** reconciliation: vertical is with God and horizontal is with our neighbor. Reconciliation requires both parties to want to be in relationship again. That’s always possible with God, as long as we’re willing. It’s usually possible with our neighbor, but if we’re willing and they’re not, we can at least pray for grace to forgive – not to forget the hurt, the insult, the bombing, the betrayal, but to let go of our desire for vengeance, to quench our wish to see the other go down in flames. When we are able to pray that powerful two-word prayer, **“Father, forgive”** we acknowledge that we are guilty, too, of more than we realize, and we, too, are in need of God’s saving grace. **“Father, forgive”** are the words that can carry us from Good Friday to Easter, no matter how long the wait.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham