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**October 8, 2017**

**A TALE OF TWO CATHEDRALS**  
**Text: Haggai 2:3-9; Romans 8:28**

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was  
the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was  
the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was  
the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was  
the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...

So began Charles Dickens in his classic, *A Tale of Two Cities*. And if those words apply to two cities, London and Paris, during the French Revolution, they also apply to two cathedrals, Durham and Coventry, during the Second World War. Today's sermon tells their stories, and between them lies the mystery of God's Providence. The Providence of God is how God works in the best and worst of life to bring redemption.

The German Reich planned its blitzkrieg of England. Sites were picked out; Durham and Coventry were chosen to be bombed. Coventry was destroyed and Durham was saved, but that is just the part of the story. Hear now a Tale of Two Cathedrals.

I

Durham Cathedral is one of the great old cathedrals of England. This masterpiece of Romanesque architecture sits on a stone cliff, and just below, at its feet, the River Wear does a

hairpin turn. From the river bank below, the cathedral rises stunningly up into the sky. In 1072, William the Conqueror had claimed the land and built a castle there. A hundred years later the cathedral was built on that same spot.

Built on the site of a fortress, the cathedral was described by Sir Walter Scott as “half church of God, half castle against the Scot.” Somehow it has withstood the onslaught of both warrior and weather to stand today much as it was built eight hundred years ago. It carries with it the air of invincibility.

Perhaps its most dramatic escape was that episode during World War II. The Nazi blitzkrieg flew over northern England. But when it approached Durham a mysterious mist, said by some to be sent by God, settled over and around the town and concealed it from the bomber pilots who flew above. “God saved the cathedral!” the people exclaimed in praise and joy. It stands as a sign of the Providence of God. The cathedral seems to have lived a charmed existence, as if protected by the hand of God. That is the tale of one cathedral, Durham; now let’s turn to another, Coventry.

## II

Coventry’s Cathedral did not escape the scourge of war. It too was one of England’s premier cathedrals. Begun in the thirteenth century, it must have risen majestically over the English countryside. Over the years Coventry became a famous industrial town, known in modern times for its manufacture of cars and planes. It was no wonder then that during World War II it

became a chief center for the production of instruments of war—and as such a center became a prime target for the German war planes.

“On November 14, 1940, Coventry Cathedral died in the flames” which destroyed the city around it. No mist covered the city that day. It was the first attempt ever made in warfare to destroy a city in one single operation from the air. It was a devastating technique used many time thereafter, but Coventry was first; and a new word came into the language: “coventrate”, which means to “destroy utterly”. That the bombs did, November, 1940. The cathedral, along with the city, was utterly destroyed. It is hard for the mind to grasp the horror of that day with human bodies lying wasted all through the town.

The city, the cathedral, had the choice of how to respond to the devastation: whether to take the road of vengeance and hatred or the road of forgiveness. It is the choice we, all of us, have when life has done its worst to us. At that moment of choice, in C.S. Lewis’ words, “The angels of God hold their breath to see which way we will choose to go.”

The angels held their breath that morning when the Provost of the Cathedral, Richard Howard, walked through the rubble with a small group from the church. Among them was Jock Forbes, a stonemason and caretaker of the cathedral grounds. Jock was unlearned in formal theology, but out of the instinct of the faith learned in his lifetime of being a Christian, he did a simple thing that will never be forgotten. Kicking around in the rubble, he found two charred beams from the fourteenth century roof, about five feet long, fastened them into the shape of a cross and planted that cross in a mound of rubble, thus transforming it into a Calvary. As if to underline the message, a local priest, A.P. Wale, fastened three nails, about eight inches long,

into the form of a cross, nails which had fallen from the fourteenth-century roof and now littered the ground.

The road was taken. The words of Christ from the cross spilled into the air, “Father, forgive.” Two months later, Mr. Forbes built a rough stone altar and placed it where the ornate marble altar had once stood. There in the ruins the words, “Father, Forgive” were inscribed. The charred cross was placed behind the altar, and on the altar was set the cross of nails. The place was to become a place of reconciliation.

A new cathedral was planned. The words from scripture became prophecy for them: “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former glory, saith the Lord of Hosts; and in this place I will give peace” (Haggai 2:9). Those ancient words of the prophet Haggai to Coventry in 1940 struck uncanny resonance with Haggai’s own setting. The people of Israel had believed their own city and temple inviolable, perfectly protected by God. But war had destroyed both Jerusalem and temple; and there, standing in the ruins of history, they heard the word of the Lord: “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former.”

Those words illumine the latter glory of Coventry Cathedral. A new cathedral rose from the ashes of the old, a new cathedral not fashioned in the image of the old, but in a new vision of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Today, as you approach the cathedral you first walk through the ruins of the old cathedral. There is no roof, no walls; only an outline of the former walls jutting jagged out of the ground. As you approach the rough stone altar, you see behind it the two charred roof beams

fashioned into a cross; you see the words “Father Forgive,” and on the altar stands the cross of nails.

Only then do you turn to your left and see at dramatic right angle to the old cathedral the entrance the new cathedral. The whole front wall is fashioned with clear glass so that you can see from the ruins into the new cathedral and so that you, from inside the new cathedral, will always see the ruins. It is a dramatic symbol of the redemptive grace of God; from Crucifixion comes Forgiveness and from Forgiveness comes Resurrection.

The new cathedral was built by people and with gifts from all over the world. As a sign of reconciliation, a crew from Germany came and stayed six months building the international center there and helping with the new construction.

As you enter the new cathedral your attention is grasped by the breath-taking baptismal window to the right depicting the light of God breaking into the world. On both walls, as you walk toward the pulpit and altar, there are New Testament sayings carved into the stone. Then as you stand before the altar your eyes gaze up to the world’s largest tapestry, 79 by 39 feet, green and purple, red and gold, which dominates the cathedral. There on this glorious tapestry is the risen Christ enthroned in glory wearing a workman’s apron, his nail-scarred hands raised in blessing, an image of the mystery of Blessing and the mystery of Providence: a crucified and risen Lord raising ruined hands in blessing.

As you leave the cathedral, the inscription in stone beneath the west window catches both eye and heart:

To the Glory of God

This Cathedral Burnt

November 14, A.D. 1940

Is Now Rebuilt 1962

In the mystery of God's redeeming grace, it has all been to God's glory. Pilgrims come from all over the globe to see the new cathedral and to be touched by its message of forgiveness and reconciliation. And there has arisen from the cathedral an organization called the Community of the Cross of Nails formed and devoted to the ministry of reconciliation, reaching across the world. Coventry has attracted artists from all over the world and inspired them to put God's vision into art. Benjamin Britten's religious masterpiece *War Requiem* was first performed there.

"The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former glory," saith the Lord. Indeed.

### III

Have you forgotten about the other cathedral, Durham? Let's go back to the morning after the bombing raids. Looking at Durham and Coventry, what would you have said that day? God saved Durham, but not Coventry? Would you have said that God's glory shone brighter around Durham than Coventry?

The intervening years have given us deeper insight into the mystery of God's Providence, and this Tale of Two Cathedrals becomes a parable of God's Providence – and of life itself.

There are those who seem to have lived a charmed existence relatively free from the crippling blows of pain and darkness, those for whom Durham is their tale; and there seems to be no discernable pattern as to why. “God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike.” These words of Jesus suggest that the Providence of God is the impartial goodness of God extended to good and evil alike, which is to say that wherever God’s providential care is at work, it is at work for everybody regardless of their moral status, their ecclesiastical affiliation or their political persuasion.

So the question comes: Did God really send the mists to cover Durham and, if so, why did God not send them to cover Coventry as well? And I confess the perplexity is deep. It is impossible for me to imagine a God sitting in the heavens directing the weather. Weather patterns—I think of hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria—are too capricious in their capacity to give and take life for me to make God the director of their daily activity. I do, however, think we can pause to see the essential character of nature as good, dominated not by caprice but by constancy, providing the conditions for life on this planet. So the mystery of goodness outweighs the mystery of evil.

We should clearly say that God in God’s Providence would want no city bombed (As Jesus said, “It is not the will of the Father that any of his little ones should perish”); and that God does all God can do, within the preserving of our freedom as human persons, to clear the clouds and mists of our minds and hearts to prevent such a thing. We are partners with God in the making of peace.

But while I am reluctant to make God the sender of those mists over Durham, nevertheless, I give God thanks for them. Who of us could, or should, have stifled the impulse of gratitude in that dramatic day of rescue? For any act of goodness or good fortune it is right to give thanks, though it is not right to claim special status with God as a reason (To do one is to offer gratitude, to do the other is to claim credit.)

But Providence is not to be seen only in cases like Durham, where people are miraculously rescued from danger. Providence is also, perhaps more profoundly, seen in the case when the Spirit of God redeems us in the midst of calamity and makes our latter glory greater than the former. And that is, of course, where Coventry comes in.

I imagine that for many of us Coventry is more our tale than Durham. The mists have not come and protected us from life's onslaughts. Sin and death have done their jobs—both from within and without. So the Tale of Two Cathedrals becomes a parable of life, the story of two nations, two families, two sisters, two sons, two co-workers in the Trade Center—one saved, the other not, two friends in war, one taken and the other not, two concert goers in Las Vegas, one killed, the other not.

If Durham is your story, if life has been kind, do not be ashamed to raise your thanks to God. For God's sake and yours, do not feel guilty over life having been so good to you. God would only want more to have your good fortune.



But if Coventry is your story and you have been left to sift through the rubble and wreckage of your life, I pray this morning you will find there a couple of charred roof beams and fasten them into a cross. I pray from those ashes will come a resurrection.

I do not think it too much to pray that the latter glory of your house be greater than the former glory, for this is the glory of the grace of Jesus Christ.

He will bind your wounds and nurse you back on your feet. He will heal the broken bones of your life. He will take your failures and bring you a new life. He will take your pain and turn it into compassion. He will take your fearful heart and give you courage. He will take your hurt and fashion it into a passion for peace. Your Coventry will have become your calling.

He will help you face your darkness with the words of Paul, spoken through the lens of the cross and the resurrection: “We know that in everything, God works for good with those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose” (Romans 8:28).

You may walk with a limp, but you will walk. As the pilgrims to Coventry, you will walk through the ruins of the old cathedral to get to the new. Your scars may be tender, but your life is being renewed by the grace of God. There in the rubble you fashion a cross.

That is the opportunity for you on the other side of the cross. That is the *crossroad* of the cross, the cross in the life of the world, the cross in the life of the nation, the cross in the heart of God, the cross in your heart.

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Such is the mystery of life, the mystery of Durham and Coventry. Only the word of the cross can penetrate that mystery. Will you receive the healing of that word and follow in that way?

The angels of God hold their breath.