At 7.20pm of 14 November 1940 bombs began falling on the city of Coventry. The main targets were the city’s weapons factories and industrial infrastructure. At around 8pm an incendiary bomb hit Coventry Cathedral and it was set on fire. Volunteer fire-fighters were on duty that night in the Cathedral and they put out the first fire, but more fires followed. By the time the all clear sounded at 06:15 on the morning of 15 November, two-thirds of Coventry’s buildings were damaged, one third of the factories were completely destroyed – and the Cathedral was a burnt-out ruin. About 30,000 civilians took to surrounding country or to air-raid shelters and were saved. Sadly more than 500 civilian lives were lost.

One month later the RAF launched its first incendiary-intensive raid of the war, on the city of Mannheim.

And ten days after that the Provost of Coventry Cathedral, Dick Howard, made a remarkable Christmas Day radio broadcast on the BBC. He spoke from the ruins of the burnt-out Cathedral. He said that after the war Britain should work with those who had been enemies ‘to build a kinder, more Christ-like world.’

Then he gave this intention physical form. He had the words ‘Father Forgive’ inscribed on the walls of the ruined chancel. Two charred beams which had fallen in the shape of a cross were placed on an altar of rubble. Three medieval nails which had been blasted free of the ancient structure were formed into a cross. This Cross of Nails became the symbol of reconciliation between Coventry, Dresden, Berlin and Kiel in the late 1940s. Today the Community of the Cross of Nails is a movement of 150 peace and reconciliation workers across the world.

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One thing which is striking about Dick Howard’s words and actions is how little time passed between the raid and the commitment he made to forgiveness and reconciliation: only around six weeks. He might have been reading today’s Gospel: what must be done should not be delayed. Put oil into the lamp of your faith now, when you can, for you ever know when you will need it. There is no time to delay. Now is the time to prepare for and to bring in the Kingdom: to turn towards truth, towards healing and towards hope.

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For Dick Howard in Coventry, remembrance was necessary. So it is for us today, as we remember the sacrifices made in war, especially those made in the last 100 years.

Remembrance is necessary for three reasons. Firstly, remembering is required for truth, for honouring the reality of the past.

Secondly, remembering is required for healing and reconciliation. Memory can be ‘the bridge between adversaries’ as well as a gulf which separates them. (Thus say the theologian Miroslav Volf in his book The End of Memory, which discusses Volf’s own experiences of violence in communist Yugoslavia.)

Thirdly, remembering is necessary for hope, for learning how to seek a better future, learning about what it is that we hope for.

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No remembering is easy. Howard’s was not. Ours is not. No part of it is easy. Firstly, honouring the reality of the past is not easy: for the past is traumatic, when we consider our own experiences, and those of our communities, and indeed those of the communities we counted as our enemies.

Secondly, healing and reconciliation are not easy, because the human instinct is to hate and revenge, when we feel ourselves wronged.

Thirdly, learning is not easy, because it is so easy to learn only superficially, to entertain false hopes, to hope for a fantasy. When we think of false hopes, we might think of the ‘fantasy peace’ of endless compromise, where it is never
necessary to stand up for what it right – and we might think the last hundred years in Europe show us that that is indeed a fantasy.

We might also think of the words of Amos. He tells us that we may think we desire the day of the Lord; but what we often in fact desire is a fantasy about that day. If that’s what we do, then seeking salvation from a lion, we are liable to run unexpectedly into a bear. Seeking the shelter of a house, we will put our hand on the wall and a serpent may bite us. We only seek the day of the Lord truly, Amos says, if we are willing to pray with him, ‘Let judgement run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream’

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Remembering well can only be done in faith. Our faith not only calls us to the work of remembering, it also gives us the resources for it.

By grace we are able to remember the events of the past in the light of the whole of Salvation history: God’s good creation, human falling short, slavery, exodus, Christ’s incarnation, teaching, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost. By grace we are able to place our own experiences and those of our communities in the context of our own lives of faith. By grace we can find the courage we need to face reality, through our trust in God’s good purposes for us and all His world

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So let me suggest three prayers we can make this morning: that we may be strengthened not to delay in filling the lamps of our lives with the oil of faith; that we may not delay in doing the difficult work of remembering; and that God may bring in his Kingdom of peace, of freedom from pain and death, and of the reconciling love which is able to overcome all hatred and division.