

Mothers' Union Service: Coventry Cathedral 27th April 2013

The Mothers Union is a wonderful organisation, and it is a great privilege to welcome you here today at the re-commissioning of Felicity as Provincial President. I hope that you enjoy your day here, and that you find it easy to recognise that this cathedral is an entirely appropriate place to hold this great celebration, for we are both – in the cathedral as in the Mothers Union – committed to the renewing of society as a place of safety and security, undergirded by relationships of love, and a rhythm of prayer.

The Mothers Union exists in 83 countries – that's getting on for a half – and so it is one of the largest grassroots organisations in the world. And the values and vision - to bring about a world where God's love is shown through loving, respectful and flourishing relationships – is a practical and relevant vision for all. As you know, this is not simply vague hope, an aspiration without content, but a goal which is “actively pursued through prayer, programmes, policy work and community relationships”. And the focus for that work is through support offered for marriage and family life, especially through times of adversity.

The Mothers Union, of course, is not limited in its membership to mothers, nor even solely to women – but has become a way for anyone to express their commitment to the strengthening of the bonds of society through the strengthening of family life – whatever shape that family might take, especially amongst the vulnerable and marginalized. It is amongst these people – who may be poor, or who may struggle for other reasons, that the work of the MU is perhaps most important. Indeed, these may be the less traditional forms of family life – and ones which therefore need even more support.

Of course, the Mothers Union is a Christian organisation, born out of the vision of Mary Sumner in the latter years of the nineteenth century. Her vision, to support family life, was a natural expression of her Christian faith, and her prayer, which will be used later in this service, demonstrates how she simply saw herself as a means of sharing the love of God. If it had simply been in her own strength, the Mothers Union would not have survived, and would not have the four million members it has today. It is a partnership between God's love, and those who have known that love for themselves and want to make it know to others. Her prayer is a prayer for the Holy Spirit to be at work in the world, in families, in the lives of those she met.

The Holy Spirit makes God known to us, and joins us with one another. The Holy Spirit brings us into partnership with one another, and with God through Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit breaks open life's prisons, lets in the light and warmth of God's love, restores relationship and makes all things new. The work of the Mothers Union is, in truth, one facet of the work of the Holy Spirit in our world today.

And it is the Holy Spirit who brings hope, and confidence that what we do, with God's help, can make a real difference. Even if it seems a small thing, it can lead to momentous changes –

especially when that small thing is joined with other small things through a worldwide organisation.

As Felicity says in her introductory words in the service booklet,

We all face challenges, in our families, in our faith, in our churches and local communities, as well as at a national level.

Those challenges can I believe be simply summed up under one word – relationship. The Mothers Union was born out of Mary Sumner’s commitment to supporting loving parental relationships which would offer children the love, and the especially the love of God, which would enable them to thrive. The renewing and supporting of loving relationships continues to be your core task – something which you witness to, and put into practice, every day.

The ministry of this cathedral also arises out of the desire to see relationships renewed and nourished. Most of you will know, I’m sure our history: that one night in November 1940 the old cathedral church of St. Michael was destroyed by German incendiary bombs. The next morning my predecessor, Provost Howard, stood in the midst of the smoking rubble and declared that we would rebuild – not as a sign of defiance of a human enemy, but as a sign of hope. When he wrote the famous words on the sanctuary wall, ‘Father Forgive’, he was challenged about missing the third word – ‘them’ out: but he wanted to acknowledge that all of us bear our part in the faults and failures of this world, all of us have fallen short, and all of us can play our part in rebuilding not just a cathedral, but a world, as God wants it to be. Here I this cathedral we want to stand against the categorisation of the world in to ‘us’ and ‘them’ – we want to see everyone as a partner in building the Kingdom of God – we are ‘us’ together.

And so from the rubble of the old cathedral rose, eventually, this glorious building in which we are now gathered.

There are many striking things about this story, which as a fairly new Dean here I am enjoying telling to successive groups of visitors. But one aspect to ponder today, as we consider our theme, ‘Seeds of Hope’, is the seed from which this building and the ministry of reconciliation embodied here sprang. It sprang from a seed of hope that God would forgive, and would bless a renewed relationship. It was in itself a small thing, but its story has led to an international community, the Community of the Cross of Nails, formed around a conviction that God can take even the worst thing, and make something new, when it is offered back to him in a spirit of shared repentance.

As Felicity goes on to say, in her introduction:

... with God’s help, nothing is impossible. As we seek to sow seeds for Mothers’ Union, let us hold hands in solidarity with members around the world, and trust him for the increase.

Each time we acknowledge the reality of the challenge, recognise God's presence with us, and offer ourselves to him in his work of rebuilding a broken world, we sow a seed of hope. Each time we help someone in broken relationship know that we stand with them in their brokenness, without condemnation, and that Jesus stands with them too, we sow a seed of hope. Each time we support a loving relationship, we sow a seed of hope.

The worst thing that anyone can feel is to be alone. In our blame and shame culture, it can be easy for those who find themselves suffering and struggling in a place of brokenness to suffer the further agony of being isolated. One of the most moving things in the story of the bombed cathedral was the signs of God's presence in the midst of devastation and despair. When Jock Forbes, the cathedral stonemason, looked down from the tower and saw the two great wooden beams fallen in a cross shape in the midst of the fallen masonry, he saw a sign of Christ's presence in the midst of destruction. And a few days later, a local priest, Arthur Wales, picked up three of the great medieval nails which littered the site and bound them into the first cross of nails, and which now sits at the heart of the great high altar cross as the heart of the new cathedral. That has become another sign which has gone out from here across the world as a sign to gather men and women to sow seeds for a new, and different future – a kinder, more Christ Child like world, as Provost Howard put it all those years ago.

Wood and Nails – ordinary things, the stuff of life, the materials for building. Signs of crucifixion, but also signs of construction – of building a new and different world. In the Mother's Union you take the ordinary things of life – human families – and recognise that they are the essential building blocks for society. People need help, though, to build well – and that, too, is your commitment. (Don't be like the "devout women" of the Acts reading!)

And so today we recognise that all that we are doing is part of the greater work of God in strengthening and restoring relationships between men, women and children, and with him. Here in this cathedral we have been speaking a great deal recently about being "Hand in hand in hand" - hand in hand with God, hand in hand with one another. Whenever we hold out our hands to God, whenever we hold them out to one another, we are sharing in the great renewal of the Holy Spirit, offering ourselves to be part of God's kingdom, and offering others the opportunity to do the same. It's a great partnership which we celebrate today – a partnership which is given tangible form in the Eucharist where Jesus entrusts himself into our hands in bread and wine, and we hold out our hands to receive him afresh. Seeds of hope are being sowed today in our offering of our lives in response to Christ's offering of his: we trust God to see those seeds grow into a better, more Christ like world.

Amen.