



4th Week of Easter 11th May 2025
Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

The Phoenix Rises from the Ashes

"They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14)

On Monday of this week 5 May VE Day was the main focus of the BBC Radio 4 Today Programme, and central to that was a piece on the destruction of Coventry Cathedral. Hit directly by several incendiary bombs, the Cathedral burned with the city. The decision to rebuild the Cathedral was taken the morning after the destruction. The account on the internet states: *"Rebuilding would not be an act of defiance, but rather a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world.....it was decided to preserve the remains of the old Cathedral as a moving reminder of the folly and waste of war."* Shortly after the destruction two of the charred medieval roof timbers were discovered to have fallen in the shape of a cross. They were later placed on an altar of rubble with the moving words *"Father forgive"* inscribed on the Sanctuary wall of the ruined Cathedral.

The new Cathedral which adjoins the old was designed by Sir Basil Spence and opened in 1962. The "Phoenix rising from the ashes" is a phrase often used about Coventry in general after the blitz in 1940 and the Cathedral in particular. In Greek mythology, the Phoenix is a mythical bird known for its ability to be reborn from its ashes, symbolising immortality and renewal. In early Christianity it became a potent symbol of resurrection.

The charred Cross made from the wooden beams of the shell of the old Cathedral now sits above the Altar there. It influenced the abstract Cross on the High Altar in the new Cathedral, representing a phoenix rising from the ashes. My Ordination Card in 1967 has a painting of this Cross done by a student artist, a friend at the English College in Rome. On the card I had the words *"The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a reason for many"* (Mark 10:45) my ideal for Priestly life. It is through carrying the Cross that Jesus rose to new life. In the new Cathedral in Coventry the Risen Christ is depicted in a magnificent tapestry entitled "Christ is Glory" by Graham Sutherland. It depicts Christ seated in an almond-shaped aura of light known as a mandorla – often used in medieval art to show Christ as a divine person. There are over 900 colours in the design which was woven from behind in a workshop near Aubusson in France. It is indeed magnificent as you look down the nave of the Cathedral towards the High Altar in the Lady Chapel.

When people visit the Cathedral in Coventry today VE Day 8 May they may well reflect on the words spoken by President Biden in an interview for the Today Programme

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yesterday: *"My generation knew 80 years ago: there are things worth fighting and dying for."* VE Day will be marked with a Service of Thanksgiving in Westminster Abbey today at 12 noon. The King and Queen will attend. We all know we enjoy freedom today thanks to those who gave so much. Indeed as has been said while the veterans of the war grow fewer and *"links with the past grow thinner, the lessons are no less important."*

One of those lessons came to my mind as I reflected on the charred wooden Cross in the ruins of Coventry's old Cathedral and the new Cross impacted by the image of the Phoenix, is in the Resurrection Tapestry of Sutherland: it is summed up so well in the words of a favourite Hymn/Song 'You raise me up to more than I can be' [originally out of Ireland] I've seen people weeping as it's sung: *"You raise me up to walk on stormy seas....You raise me up so that I can stand on mountains.....You raise me up....when I am down and, oh, so weary when troubles come and my heart burdened be....I am strong when I am on your shoulders..."* The lyrics include these words:

*"Then I am still and wait here in silence
Until you come and sit a while with me."*

I am sure these words are interpreted in many different ways by those who find comfort in those lyrics, but for those gathered in Westminster Abbey or in Coventry Cathedral they point to Jesus who puts us in contact with God the Father, removing all distance between us. Our relationship with Jesus is an invitation to share in the life of God.

Let us pray this Good Shepherd Sunday that we may find a way to take the good news of the Gospel to others, in particular those who have lost loved ones in war or in other tragic circumstances. The words of St John in the Book of Revelation this 4th Sunday of Easter speak to the times we are remembering in these days:

"They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.... The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Amen

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