

The Very Reverend John Witcombe,

Monday 25 July 2022, awarded Honorary Doctor of Letters (Hon DLitt)

with oration given by Provost, Professor Christine Ennew

I am delighted to introduce our honorary graduand this afternoon: the Dean of Coventry Cathedral, THE VERY REVEREND JOHN WITCOMBE.

Coventry Cathedral has played an important role in the history of this University. It was the Bishop of Coventry who, in the early 1960s, suggested our name; the University's Service of Dedication was held in the Cathedral in 1965, and – until increasing student numbers created logistical difficulties – it hosted our Degree Congregations. But the connections between our two institutions go rather deeper with our respective commitments to inclusion, to celebrating diversity and our various responsibilities for City of Sanctuary and University of Sanctuary.

We are recognising John today with the award of an honorary degree, not just because of his role in the Cathedral but also because of his wide-ranging contribution to the city and beyond, and his national and

international leadership around peace and reconciliation. Coventry, which suffered terrible destruction during the Second World War, is known internationally as the City of Peace and Reconciliation, and the Cathedral which he currently leads, is at the heart of this mission. A key part of his role is to be Dean of the Community of the Cross of Nails, a global centre in Coventry that looks to ‘heal the wounds of history’, to build a culture of peace, to live with difference and to celebrate diversity – all of which embody John’s reasons for ordination.

The Cross of Nails was created in the immediate aftermath of the extensive bombing of the city and the destruction of the cathedral in 1940. It comprises 3 nails salvaged from the collapsed medieval roof and serves as a symbol both of death and destruction but also hope and resurrection. A global “Community of the Cross of Nails” unites a range of organisations including churches, charities, peace-building centres, and schools. They all share the commitment that our Cathedral has to reconciliation, to inclusion and to building a culture of peace; they all share the belief that we have more to unite us than divide us. And they all have their own cross of nails to connect them back to Coventry. With over 250 partners world-wide,

Coventry has run out of medieval nails but new ones are produced by inmates of a prison in Wurzburg in Germany. John has delivered many of these crosses personally to community members around the world, although he fairly rapidly learned that carrying a cross made from large nails in your hand luggage was perhaps not the best of ideas.

Ordination wasn't the planned outcome when John started an undergraduate degree in Law at Cambridge in the late 1970's. But a range of experiences during University life and beyond were to shape his career aspirations and his theological views. He describes the impact of a gay friend who withdrew from bible study because there was no place in the church for "people like me". He talks about his involvement with CND, but perhaps most significantly - he reflects on vacation work in a variety of mundane and poorly rewarded roles which alerted him to the poverty of experience in so many deprived communities. These were all-consuming experiences – ones which shaped a future career and inspired him to think about how theology, how the gospel could and should enable people to be themselves, how it should be inclusive and how it needed to be able to create and communicate hope for all.

John has been Dean of Coventry Cathedral since 2013. He completed his law degree but had long since realised that his future lay outside of the legal profession and he trained for ordination in Nottingham; he subsequently completed an MPhil in Atonement Theology. His initial appointment was as an industrial chaplain in Birtley in County Durham. After leading churches in Nottingham, Sheffield, and West London, he became Dean of St John's College Nottingham, teaching Practical Theology and leading its residential community. A period in Gloucester followed, where John progressed to be Director of Ministry and Residentiary Canon of Gloucester Cathedral before moving to his present post. Here, he provides business as well as spiritual leadership: he is effectively CEO of Coventry Cathedral, which he has moved to a more sustainable financial position, as well as broadening its reach into the community.

"BY THE AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE, I ADMIT YOU TO THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LETTERS, HONORIS CAUSA".