Thank you all so much for the warmth of your welcome, not only here today, but also over these last couple of months as we as a family have begun to adjust to our new life here in Coventry. And thank you too to all those who have taken the trouble to get up at the crack of dawn to make it here this morning, especially those who have travelled up from Newbury. It’s great to see you all looking so much older and wiser...

In all the upheaval of moving house, I have been reflecting on how wonderful it must be to be a snail. Just think - there’s no need to pack everything into boxes at one end and then unpack them all again at the other. Just take a deep breath, hoist your house around your shoulders and off you go! How marvellous that would have been for us over the last week or so...

I don’t know - is it just me or is the ability to accumulate clutter a universal human characteristic? We undertook a major cull before we left Newbury. But even so, we have repeatedly opened boxes over the last few days and marvelled at how we ever thought that their contents might, to coin a phrase, ‘come in useful one day’. They may do - but I somehow doubt it...

Of course, clutter isn’t something we only encounter on the domestic front. There can be quite a bit of it in our spiritual lives too. Even - or, dare I say, especially - for those of us who have the privilege of coming together in a wonderful place like this. And spiritual clutter can be just as much of a burden, just as much of a distraction, as the clutter that builds up in our homes.

Which brings us to what Bertram and Philip read to us earlier, from the letter to Philemon and the Gospel of Luke. How good it is, on an occasion like this, to look afresh at the essentials of what it means to follow Jesus Christ. To be reminded of the core of what we’re about. To focus on Christianity without the clutter.

It’s rather ironic, isn’t it? After a week in which the busyness of sorting out our stuff seems to have occupied a good deal of my time, I hear these uncomfortably radical words of Jesus: ‘None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions’. Holding what we have in an open rather than a closed hand, being willing to give generously to those in need, is something which cannot be avoided by those who decide to follow Jesus Christ.

And then during this service, just a few minutes ago, being given this Cross of Nails to wear. How easy it would be for even this to become little more than an item of ecclesiastical clutter. Jesus is crystal clear, isn’t he? Merely to wear this is not enough. ‘Whoever does not carry the cross - not just hang a silver replica round his neck! - whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple’. As the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, ‘When Christ calls someone, he bids them come and die’.

For some of his followers, of course, not least Bonhoeffer himself, this is literally what Jesus meant. But for the great majority, including most of us here today, the pattern for following Jesus is the one set, not by martyrs like Bonhoeffer, but by more ordinary Christians like Philemon. I realise that I may be about to do him an injustice - but I wonder how Philemon felt as he read Paul’s letter to him. I have a hunch that he would have found it rather difficult. I suspect he would have been less than delighted at what Paul asks him to do. What do you think?

After all, Philemon would have been well within his rights to have treated his runaway slave Onesimus with the utmost severity. No-one would have been surprised. No-one would have blamed him. Being asked to forgive him, to welcome him back with open arms, to treat him as a Christian brother sounds like a really big ask. And indeed it is - but it’s no more than what Philemon signed up for in becoming a follower of Jesus Christ.
For this is how to follow Christ - to die to ourselves. This is how to follow Christ - to give up our possessions. This is how to follow Christ - to do what he himself did - not insisting on our rights but giving way, even when to do so is really costly. For us, the parallels with Philemon aren’t exact, of course. Few of us have runaway slaves to contend with! But there are all sorts of other ways in which we’re invited to ‘die’, aren’t there? All sorts of other ways in which we’re asked to choose not to insist on our rights but to let go of them for Jesus’ sake.

And because this is such a big ask, because we naturally hesitate at what he asks of us, because we find it hard, he helps us. ‘We love because he first loved us’ is how the apostle John sums it up. This is what is going on in every act of true worship. The idea is that we receive a fresh understanding and experience of the depth of God’s love for us and then respond by reflecting that love back to him and to others. Supremely in the Eucharist, the service of Holy Communion we are participating in together today, we see, we hear, we taste the One who says to us ‘My body, given for you’ and have the opportunity to respond with ‘My body, Lord, given for you. My life, Lord, lived for you.’

A few years ago, I had the privilege of editing a new edition of John Stott’s book ‘Basic Christianity’. The part that struck me most was in the chapter where he writes about what it means to follow Jesus: ‘If we want a life of easy-going self-indulgence, then Christianity is not for us. But if we want a life of self-discovery, deeply satisfying to the nature God has given you; if we want a life of adventure in which we have the privilege of serving him and other people; if we want a life in which to express something of the overwhelming gratitude we sense for the one who died for us, then let us yield our lives, without reservation and without delay, to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.’ This is basic Christianity. This is Christianity without the clutter. Amen.