In 1962, my parents brought me here to see England’s newest Cathedral (and also to drive up the M1 which to a 12 year old was even more exciting). I have a vivid memory of that summer day. Most of all, it was of standing on the black floor whose surface was as polished as a mirror, and seeing my own image reflected back at me. The floor is grey now, and so am I. But age should bring a different kind of reflectiveness both in people and in buildings. This cathedral is not less beautiful for having lived through its first half-century; indeed, it is hallowed through use, by millions of footsteps and prayers and longings and candles and tears. They bring a beauty of their own. We don’t see our own image in the floor now, but perhaps that serves to point us away from the narcissistic tendency to be absorbed with our own image and instead look up to the living God.

What is it about Coventry that lifts the spirit? There are not many 20th century buildings that have the capacity to inspire, as last week’s Guardian poll to find the nation’s favourite building discovered. No doubt we all have our own personal ‘take’ on this cathedral; the longer we have known and loved it, the richer our associations will be. It is so many things: a masterpiece of 20th century architecture and art, a symbol of this city’s resurgence after its battering in war. Through the friendships it has fostered across the world, it is a sign that the memories of conflict can be healed. It is the bishop’s church and the diocese’s gathering place. It is a sacred canopy beneath which we gather to celebrate the words and works of God and proclaim the gospel. It is a forum where people who care about our society can meet and work out how to help it flourish. It is a sanctuary for people in need. It is home to its own community, a space set aside for praise and lament, for the offering of all of life to God.

For me, it stands as an eloquent symbol of resurrection: this is what makes it such a profoundly life-affirming place. I don’t mean the oft-quoted tag that to walk from the ruins into this new building is to walk from death to life. It’s true that Basil Spence spoke about the ruins as a memory of sacrifice and this building as having risen from the dead. But I think the truth is deeper and richer than that. The entire cathedral, ruined and rebuilt, is a proclamation of the resurrection. When I used to read the Litany of Reconciliation in the ruins, and preside at early-morning communions there on Easter Day and Pentecost, I thought to myself: this is like the empty tomb. These ancient walls and the canopy of the sky above: what could be a more powerful symbol of resurrection? And then to move into this building and be greeted by Sutherland’s great tapestry of Christ in Glory: that was like walking from the empty tomb into a meeting with the risen Christ himself, precisely the journey Mary made in our New Testament reading when Jesus found her at the tomb and revealed himself by calling her by her name.

It is a privilege to be back here for this Friends’ Festival and the launch of the new book Coventry Cathedral – Reconciling People. This is not yet the Golden Jubilee, but it is a forerunner of it. When I came here in 1987, my first job was to devise the Silver Jubilee service on 25 May that year. Some of you will recall what the preacher, Archbishop John Habgood, said then. He took a resurrection image from the Hebrew Bible where Isaiah says that ‘they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint’. Then he took a deep breath and said that in its first 25 years, Coventry Cathedral has flown like a bird, spectacularly, and run like an athlete. It was known all over the world for its courage in doing new things. But, he said (and now I am interpreting rather than remembering), perhaps it was time in the next quarter century to learn how to walk: to understand how a slower pace, andante rather than vivace, gives time to be more present to our diocese, our city, our local communities, to one another and to God; to discover what George Herbert’s poem calls ‘heaven in ordinary’.

We know that this is how it is in our personal lives. We need to learn that it is true of cathedrals too. In our western culture, we have got used to the idea that to succeed, organisations need to be fast. Certainly, my feet never seemed to touch the ground when I was here. Yet this Cathedral, like Durham, owes much to its Benedictine past; we believe that the Rule of St Benedict has great wisdom to impart as we try to give shape and pattern to our corporate life and personal relationships so many centuries later. Benedictine order recognises that everything has its own rhythm and
pace: there is a time to fly and a time to run, a time to walk and a time to stand in the interplay of daily work, the offering of prayer and our personal growth through learning and study. So it is good to see how our new book chronicles the varied life of the Cathedral in its first five decades. Inevitably, the large and visible features prominently, and it is right to celebrate a story that has often been acted out on a big stage. We can be proud of what this Cathedral has achieved. But there is also much in the book that shows how success lies not only in grand gestures and dramatic actions, but in being faithful in the more ordinary callings of Christian and human life. This too is part of our story. If there is one thing that Coventry taught me, it is not to ‘despise the day of small things’.

I come back to the resurrection story and its verbs of motion. At the beginning, when Mary finds the stone rolled away from the tomb, she runs to tell the others. Peter and John run back there. But then, says the story, Mary stands by the tomb. And as the risen Jesus comes to her, she turns towards him. And then when he calls her by her name she turns a second time. Running gives way to standing still and turning. The story slows right down and holds its breath at that beautiful, utterly moving moment of recognition. Can this be a parable of life as it is lived in the light and power of Jesus’ resurrection? The Christian spiritual tradition says that there is action and there is reflection, and we see God and meet him in both of them. I believe Cathedrals have the special gift of being able to act with energy and make a difference in the world, sometimes in significant and lasting ways; but they also offer contemplative sacred places in which people can find peace with themselves and with God. Both are life-changing as we can testify.

And here in this incomparable place, such a potent symbol of resurrection, how do we experience coming into the nave and being greeted by the tapestry, my beloved tapestry of Christ in Glory, whether we come here to worship or to work, as strangers or as friends? What does he say to us? Today it may be: draw on my power, turn round and in my name run outside to act justly and reconcile people by showing mercy in my world. Tomorrow it may be: stand still, sit down in the middle of this great space; turn and look on me and be reconciled, take in the truth that you are known and loved and called by your name. These are the two sides of the resurrection: doing, and being, being and doing. And this is the story of our book: Coventry Cathedral – Reconciling People through the power of Christ crucified and risen and glorified, our joy and our crown here and in eternity.