We all know, I think, that reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. More than that, that reconciliation is the heart of the gospel - of making enemies into friends, of restoring humankind’s lived out love for God and for one another. To build a Kingdom of Peace where all may dwell, in justice and in joy.

This week, I have had a chance to press into the Coventry narrative of reconciliation with our friends in Dresden and Berlin, and to allow that wider story to become part of my story in this still-new role as Dean.

And this week we have begun the season of Lent together, when we are all challenged to examine ourselves for the seeds of conflict and rebellion against God or neighbour - to root out whatever would flourish into destruction in our own lives and in the Kingdom of God.

In our epistle this morning we heard these words:

*For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.*

And in our gospel, we heard of Jesus preparing for the extraordinary ministry which was to come, a ministry of radical inclusion, of complete commitment to God and all those whom God was calling to himself. So, before I return to some of the lessons from Dresden, let’s look together at the themes of today’s reading from scripture, which set the context for our reflection on God revealing himself in our experience today. And I hope you will be able to discover the connections!

Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness were temptations: first, of not trusting in God for sustenance, for the basic needs of life, for what he felt he needed; second, of not trusting in God for success or status, for the effectiveness of his life and ministry; and finally, of not trusting in the love or existence of God at all. I would describe them as temptations of the flesh, the world, and the devil. In the first stand off with Satan, he found himself asking: would he die of hunger, fail before he had even started. As in all the three, he was tempted to, shall we say, help God out a bit, to overstep the bounds of what God had called him to do, to take matters into his own hands. In the second, he is faced with wondering whether his mission would be effective? Should he enter into a pact with the devil to ensure that he would have success? What might that have looked like? I don’t know? Perhaps, to offer those who chose to follow him material reward, or power? And finally, and most subtly – and this time it is the devil, not Jesus, who quotes scripture, Satan seeks to plant the seeds of doubt in Jesus’ mind that he perhaps didn’t matter to his Heavenly Father - perhaps he should just test that he really did. Perhaps God did not exist at all, or if he did, maybe he didn’t love him. But of course, if he had given in to that, he would then have had to test it again and again - like an addiction. Jesus resists in a total recommitment to God, his love and his kingdom, which was to prepare him for all that was to come.

This narrative describes a journey that we must all make, a journey to a place of being alone with our demons, as the saying goes, to test out what our lives are really built on. Where we work out where our trust lies, where our integrity lies, where our hope lies: is it truly with God and his Kingdom, or somehow in a Kingdom of our own making? The way we answer these questions will determine the way that we spend our lives, the manner of our interactions with others, especially those who are quite different to ourselves.
Jesus returned from the wilderness, from the edge of the world, firmly established in the mission and ministry for which he had been born, to which God had called him, for which he was equipped in the power of the Holy Spirit. For him, God’s Kingdom was the absolute reality to which he was committed in word and action, and for which he was recruiting a new community of people to share, and invite others to share, in a message for all.

We stand in continuity with that community today. We are those whom Jesus calls to work with him in establishing the Kingdom on earth today. And like Jesus, and with him, we have to journey to the end of ourselves to test whether our lives really belong in the Kingdom. And often it is in unfamiliar environments that our understanding of the Kingdom, and our own relationship with it, can be opened up, stretched, and tested.

I have had, I must say, the privilege of being in a great many unfamiliar environments this month since being installed four weeks ago. This last week has been a particular education, however, as I travelled to meet our Cross of Nails partners in Dresden and Berlin. And thank you for the prayers of those of you that were promised me last Sunday - they were needed for strength and energy as much as anything else. It was quite a punishing schedule. But it has had, as you may imagine, a huge impact on me both personally and for my understanding and vision for the ministry here.

In Germany I encountered a people who were still saying sorry. I joined a procession of people in the cemetery just outside Dresden who were gathering in the snow to remember those killed - no one knows exactly the number, but certainly in excess of 25,000 - in the allied bombing of the city. As we stood shivering from cold, the mayor, Helma Orosz, spoke powerfully but with great control of the way that the war which went out from Germany came back to Dresden on February 13th, 1945. As I listened I could hear the name of Coventry mentioned in the midst of the unfamiliar language, and the person translating next to me helped me understand the way that she was refusing to bow to the pressure from the small but vocal neo-Nazi movement in Germany to claim Dresden as innocent victims of English aggression. As we walked back to the waiting cars, we walked through a large memorial circle with tablets recording the sites which continue to bring shame to the German people - Ravensbruch, Dachau, Auschwitz, and others on one side; Rotterdam, Stalingrad, Coventry amongst those on the other.

And in the Kreuzkirche, and the Frauenkirche, and the Deaconess hospital, I saw crosses of nails in central positions, with texts about reconciliation, and the Coventry litany of forgiveness with the words in German, Vater Vergib. It was, as many of you know for yourself, intensely moving. And also challenging. Because this narrative of reconciliation was still so necessary to the people I met there to be able to move forward in their lives and their community with integrity. It gave them heart, and soul. In the evening, I joined with 13,000 people in the human chain around the centre of Dresden formed by the citizens refusing to allow their history to be hijacked by demonstrators from the neo-nazi movement.

This solidarity of commitment to an inclusive society, enriched by its diversity and working energetically for peace, is a powerful force in our partners in Germany. On Thursday evening, after visiting the Church of the Reconciliation at the former Berlin Wall, and seeing the Cross of Nails there, we shared in a meal with leaders and representatives from many Cross of Nails partners in Berlin. As I listened to their stories of how they first came to have a Coventry cross of nails in their churches or centres, and how they were working today for Peace and Reconciliation, it came to me that what the mayor in Dresden had said the day before was being reflected back to me in a new way: here, something that had gone out from Coventry was now coming back in a new and wonderful way. The destruction that went out from Germany had come back in a terrible way to Dresden. But the forgiveness and vision for a new Kingdom that had gone out from Coventry was now returning in the commitment of these Community of the Cross of Nails partners to the original vision of Provost Howard, Bill Williams and others. No longer do they need us, so much as we need them, to keep our vision alive.
This was finally driven home to me on Friday morning when David and I went out to meet Juliane, the young Lutheran woman pastor and others at the site of the Garrison Church in Potsdam. The project to rebuild the church, which was tainted by associated with Hitler, badly damaged by bombing in the war and finally pulled down by the occupying Russians, has met with severe local opposition. It only makes any sort of sense if it is rebuilt as a sign of dealing with history, of exposing shame so that it can find forgiveness and healing, and form a basis of commitment to peace. And so there is a huge cross of nails hanging in front of the church, facing the street, which was presented by Paul Oestreicher.

There were journalists there, invited to meet the visiting clergy from Coventry. They wanted to know why we thought it was important to rebuild the church. In a sense, I didn’t really know - I had only learned about the church that morning. But I found myself explaining that it symbolised the bringing of history out of the dark into the light, the exposing of shame to bring the possibility of healing. Something which we, too, may need to know in our own personal lives, and also in our national and community life. Where are the memorials to the people we have needlessly attacked and massacred as a nation, places to seek healing in the history of our country or divided society. Suddenly I realised that what we could learn from our German friends was something very important, something we don’t always know we need: we need to learn how to say we are sorry. This is the purpose of the season of Lent. To learn to say sorry, to lay foundations for the future.

It wasn’t all serious, of course. Before I left Potsdam, Juliane gave us a chocolate memento of our visit. Sadly, it got a little broken in the plane, but if you would like to share, symbolically, with the messages of reconciliation of our visit, then do have a small piece of Potsdam chocolate with your coffee after the service today!

This Lent, reach beyond the familiar to allow yourself, your assumptions and prejudices, your self understanding, your own familiar narratives of belief and interpretation, to be examined and tested. Allow God to prepare you for what he wants to do next in your life, and through you in his world. What are his plans and purposes for you? How do they fit within his overall purpose of reconciling the world to himself, through Jesus Christ? What is left to reconcile within you, and me? That has to be the first question. And it is answered, first, by looking inside ourselves, often in a place without other distractions. Once that has been done, we will be in a better place to address the second, to look beyond ourselves at the world, to see those people and places which are being called into reconciliation by the Spirit of God! And to offer ourselves to God as instruments of that reconciliation.