Today is a wonderful day of celebration – a day to celebrate what God has given to us, and what we have given to him. It’s a day with three different themes, which I hope will mingle and blend in a wonderful and beautiful way in this sermon – like a many stranded cord – if not, they may just be perplexing!

My first theme is Pentecost. Pentecost was – and is – a Jewish festival, taking place fifty days after Passover. It is the day on which, as tradition has it that the law was given on Sinai, fifty days after the people of Israel escaped bondage in Egypt- the day when God gave guidance to his people about how he wanted them to live out their freedom. It is also the day when the first fruits of the harvest were celebrated and offered back to God – so it is a day of celebration, a day for giving thanks for God’s gifts, and for his guidance. A day to celebrate being God’s people, and to open themselves afresh to his provision and his purpose.

It was on this festival that Jesus’ disciples were visited by God as they prayed, and filled with a new gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit – God’s provision, and his guidance given afresh, severally and corporately, individually and together. It’s sometimes called the birthday of the church – and although there are other claims for this date, like when Jesus renames Simon Peter, that makes quite a lot of sense. It was the day when the gospel took off into the world, you might say – 3000 families became believers, and the church as a body was born, made up of individuals all filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is at the heart of the life of the church, and of every Christian. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is the breath of life itself. The more we are open to the work of the Spirit, the more we are alive – and the more we breathe the air of heaven. The work of the Holy Spirit has been celebrated in this cathedral, and this diocese, in a special way since before the consecration – because it is the Holy Spirit who draws us into God’s future, who brings new starts, and who breaks open the world so that the Kingdom of God can shine forth. When this place was built, and when Bishop Cuthbert Bardsley called for a Consecrated people for a Consecrated building, it was consciously and deliberately to the Holy Spirit that they turned – and that amazing story is told in the little book, Fire in Coventry which I strongly commend to you.

Today, it is the Holy Spirit who will enable us to move forward hand in hand with one another, and hand in hand with God. I often describe the Holy Spirit, following Bishop John Taylor’s description of the ‘Go-Between God’, as ‘the hand holding God’ – because when I look for God’s work in the world, what I see more than anything else is God taking people by the hand, leading them forward, and linking them up with one another in the building of his Kingdom: this is the work of the Spirit. Putting those hunches, insights, convictions, flashes of confidence or compassion into our minds and our hearts, which we can then share with others.

Now, of course, to have our hands taken by God, or to allow him to join them with one another, needs us to have them open and available – held out to him in worship, and in generosity. That takes us to our second theme.
Today is the final day of our stewardship programme. The day when, just as we celebrate God pouring out the gifts of his spirit on us, we hold out our gifts to him – whatever gifts we may bring: the gifts of our wealth – however meagre or munificent that may be; and the gifts of our talents, our skills, our energy and strength – however meagre or magnificent that may be. Over these last six weeks, many of us have met to consider the challenges and opportunities facing the cathedral, and our part in seeing those become a reality. We have recognized that although we don’t know exactly where the Spirit will lead us, we are being called to make ourselves and all that we have available to him, and that the sign of that may well be through our giving week by week or month by month – or in other areas of our lives, according to the skills or gifts God has given us. This is an exciting time in the cathedral and the city – at the start of a new mayoral year, there are people throughout the city saying this is a new time to be working together for the good of Coventry, and wanting the cathedral to be part of that.

And so today is about an exchange of gifts – our gifts to God, his gifts to us. We hold out open hands to him, offering him all that we are, and he pours into our open hands the gifts of the Kingdom of Heaven – eternal life, and a starring role in his unfolding drama of building new life on earth. I hope that it will be more than just our hands that we hold out to him as we gather in worship through today – that it will also be our hearts, and our minds, as we allow God to bring that transformation of life which we witness to here in our architecture and our history right into the midst of who we are – a people of Peace and Reconciliation.

And it is that transformation which brings me to my third theme for today –although, in truth, all the themes are bound up together, as you will realize. Today I am beginning a short series of sermons on the Eucharist. This week and next, and then after a week when I am away on Sunday morning preaching at a special Diamond Jubilee service for the High Sherriff of Warwickshire, again on June 9th. The titles for the three Sundays are taken from a well-known description of the ‘Shape of the Eucharist’ by Dom Gregory Dix in the early 1900’s.

Dix was an Anglican Benedictine monk – an important source of authority for cathedrals, with their Benedictine foundations. And in the first part of the last century, when the Church in England was rediscovering the centrality of Holy Communion in the church’s life, he described the actions of Jesus in the Eucharist with the bread and the wine as: taking, blessing, breaking and sharing.

I am convinced that these are a powerful image of what God does in his people, and that they are at the very heart of all that I have been talking about so far this morning, and, perhaps, all that I have been talking about since I arrived here just four months ago today. That may seem a bold claim – let me explain.

The Eucharist sums up, for me, all that we do in the life of the church. It is the place where we are truly the people of God – offering ourselves to him in worship, receiving from him the gifts of new life. It’s the place where we gather around Christ’s gift of himself to us in the words of scripture, and in the sacrament – and it is above all else the place where the Holy Spirit is at work, transforming us and creation into God’s kingdom on earth. And of course the word simply means, ‘thanksgiving’: if you go to Greece on holiday today you’ll here lots of things, but amongst them will still be the little word, ‘efcharisto’ – thank you.

The Eucharist is the great thank you of the church for God and all that he has done in Christ – but it begins as we offer our gifts to God. As we hold up gifts – our collection, usually, and then the bread and wine, before the altar, which is the place of sacrifice. This is the point at which we invite Christ to take what we bring, just as he took the bread and wine in the Upper Room.
I confess to having rather strong feelings about the offertory. I really believe that God has given us our lives, and all that we have – and has given us real freedom about what we do with them. He has trusted us with them. We can either offer them back to him, or choose not to do that – but it is our choice. Some prayers we use make it sound as though God has only lent us what we have, that actually he retains ownership all the time: I think he takes a bigger risk than that. And so I prefer the traditional words of the old Jewish offertory prayers, “Blessed are you Lord God of all creation, through your goodness we have this bread to offer, fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual food.” The liturgical terrorists replace ‘to offer’ with ‘set before you’, as if God had never really given it away … I don’t hold with that at all.

But more than that, I believe that as we come to the altar, or the table – whichever is your choice of language, and see that bread and wine held up, we can see in it something far beyond the simple gifts of food and drink. Especially in a smaller celebration, smaller than this great celebration we share in today, when I take the bread and wine into my hands and say those offertory prayers, I am praying that they become symbols of our lives and all they have become. The bread, a symbol of the solidity of my life and what I have made of it – a gift of God’s good creation, sometimes made well by me, sometimes less well, by my labour and toil, but offered back to God and taken by him. The wine, mingled with water as it always is, a symbol of the richness of my experiences of my life – of all that has befallen me, in joy or in pain, in joy or in the blood and tears of struggle, suffering and sorrow – offered back to God, and received by him. At this Eucharist altar, this great table of offering and thanksgiving, it is not just bread and wine but our lives that are offered back to God, joined with Christ’s offering on the cross, and like his offering to be transformed, broken open to allow new, transforming life to burst out afresh - for the transformation of all who share in the bread and wine now become the body and blood of Christ, and through them, for the transformation of the world.

Just a small thing then. Only the beginning of everything made new. Only the bringing into the present of all that happened 2000 years ago.

And it begins afresh today in this Eucharist, with the taking of the bread and wine. Just as it begins, in your life, as you allow yourself to be taken into the hands of Christ just as he took bread and wine with his disciples.

So, today is Pentecost, when God poured new life into the world through the Holy Spirit. One day, we’ll talk more about the Spirit, how it’s Christ that gives the Spirit and the Spirit that gives Christ, about why the filioque clause (where we say in our creed that the Spirit proceeds not just from the Father but also from the Son) caused such damage in the life of the church, about how the Spirit bind us into the world of the Kingdom, if we will allow him – or her. But that will have to wait for another day. For now, we finish by saying ‘Efcharisto’, thank you – and holding our hands out in openness and worship to the one who accepts what we bring, transforms us and our gifts for his kingdom, and renews the face of the earth. Alleluia.