Today the church celebrates the wonderful, dynamic, mystery of God. There is a German theologian called Rudolf Otto who wrote a book called ‘The Idea of the Holy’, in which he described the holiness of God in the Latin words, ‘mysterium tremendem et fascinans’ - the huge mystery which at once fascinates us and draws us in. Today, on the one Sunday in the year which by tradition strikes terror into the heart of preachers up and down the land, we seek to look into this mystery. It’s worth doing – someone else once said that sermons should be about two things – about God, and about fifteen minutes … God is what is interesting about Church, and we should not be afraid to talk about him, and not just our response to him – or perhaps I should say, “them”. I learned this week of the Orthodox writer Kallistos Ware’s favourite joke: The Holy Trinity walks into a restaurant, and the Maître d’E says to him, “Table for one, or table for three?”

Today is also the second Sunday in our short series on the Shape of the Eucharist - the great thank you that we celebrate Sunday by Sunday. Last week I introduced you to - or perhaps reminded you of - the four fold shape of what Christ did in the last supper with the bread, and the wine, in the action of taking, blessed, breaking and sharing. I believe that we can see in these four actions something profound about the way he now works with us, his people, his body, as we are taken up ourselves to bring Christ’s life to the world.

So, like last week, there are three themes to this morning’s sermon. The first is the mysterious life of God, in Trinity. The second and third are taken from the four fold shape: because I only have three weeks for my four actions, I am taking the middle two, blessed and broken, together - but it will be worth reflecting on that slightly surprising combination, as we reflect on how we are caught up ourselves in the life of the Trinity.

Some years ago, I was at the Greenbelt Christian Arts festival - a wonderful event over August Bank Holiday, held now at the Cheltenham Race Course. Late one evening, I joined one of the usual ‘alternative worship’ events. It was a Eucharist, held in one of the rooms upstairs in the complex. We were sat on the floor, and the time came to receive the sacrament, we were invited to move forward across some bare expanse of floor to where the broken bread was in baskets, on the floor, in front of mirrors leaning up against the table behind them. I was one of the first to go forward, and as I knelt to take a piece of bread, I saw written on the mirror the words, ‘The Body of Christ’. I looked at the words, and of course also saw my own face - and not only mine, but the faces of all those waiting behind me, in the crowd who had also come to the service.

I’ve never forgotten it. Here was the Body of Christ, broken bread in my hand. But here too was the body of Christ, in my body, and in the community assembled for worship - about to be transformed again into the likeness of Christ. It must, somehow be true that you are what you eat, made by what you are made of - we will again be made, together, the body of Christ by the Eucharist we share today. Transformed by the Spirit and Grace of God. This is a great mystery - but it is worth gazing into it to be caught up into its truth.

Within our Eucharistic thanksgiving you will always find the very Trinitarian prayer, for the Spirit to be poured out by the Father, that as we share in the bread and wine, we might be sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ. This is the prayer of blessing, the second action of the Eucharist. It echoes Jesus’ words when he took the bread and wine at the Last Supper and said, “This is my body; This is my blood.”
A prayer of blessing is a prayer of setting something apart for God’s special purposes. It is a prayer of commendation to God - which may be popularly understood as a simple expression of thanks, or appreciation, or a hope for protection. ‘Bless you.’ ‘Bless you for that.’ But it’s really much deeper than that - it’s a prayer that in that moment, or that person - or that object - there will be a touch of heaven, a sign of God’s kingdom in the world, a time, a person or an object dedicated especially to God’s purposes.

The prayer of blessing in the communion service has a special name - the Epiclesis. It is a prayer for the Spirit to be at work transforming. Usually, it is spoken as a word of blessing on the bread and wine, but in truth it is a prayer of blessing not just on the bread and wine, but on the whole celebration. In some of our Eucharistic prayers this becomes explicit, when we ask that the Spirit be poured out not so much on the bread and wine as on us. It is a prayer that as we receive the bread and wine it will be “to us” the body and blood of Christ - there is a deliberate choice of words to avoid the error of ‘transubstantiation’, which seeks to separate the essence of the elements of communion from the transforming work of God in the people who will receive them. Please don’t misunderstand me: I do believe that a real transformation takes place in communion - that as we hold out our hands to receive, that it truly is Christ’s life that is entrusted to our hands. But it is about transforming relationship, not impersonal magic.

This action of blessing the bread and wine is, then, truly a blessing of all of us - the real transformation which I believe is true to scripture and the tradition of the church, is in fact, a real transformation of us all. We become the body and blood of Christ as we share in this Eucharist. Surely, this is marvelous! As the Body and Blood of Christ - his powerful presence, his lifeblood in the world - we are unstoppable! Like modern day supermen, superwomen, we can go and take the world by storm! Nothing can stand in our way, as we scale tall buildings in a single bound, run faster than speeding trains, compel all people to come into the Kingdom?

Of course not! This, I believe, is the moment when the need to combine weeks two and three of our short series becomes important. Do you remember the third action? It’s breaking. Taking, Blessing, Breaking, Sharing.

If we are the body of Christ, we must expect to embody Christ’s life. As Teresa of Avila prayed, he has no hands in the world expect ours, no feet except ours, no heart and mind expect ours. And what was true of him will be true of us. The way people recognised him, should also be the way they recognise us.

How do we recognise Christ now? How did the disciples recognise Jesus after the resurrection? I’m sure you know the British Sign Language sign for Jesus - the prints of the nails in the palms of the hands. They are there in the great tapestry before us.

Christ is recognised not so much by his power, as by his brokenness. He is the wounded healer, the one who lives to love even through suffering. Especially through suffering, so that those who need to know his love, know that he loves them where they are and as they are - not in some remote, perfect, sparkling and protected place. Christ makes himself known, as we know here, in the brokenness of charred wood and fallen nails in a bombed cathedral. He makes himself known in hurt minds, torn hearts, bruised bodies and damaged lives.

To be blessed is not, it seems, to be protected from being broken. I remember being challenged myself about this in the early years of ordained ministry when I was hoping for easy and rewarding success. I felt God say to me in prayer as I asked him for the little church I was leading to grow -to be blessed - ‘it will grow, but you will be broken’. In a rather biblical sort if exchange, I suppose, I said, ‘I don’t know that I am prepared for that’. Maybe I don’t mind so much that the church grows if that’s what it will cost. And God said to me, ‘it will break you, though’, whether you want it or not. And there was truth in that. Blessing and Brokenness go together: all of the great heroes of faith, all the great ‘success stories’ that I know of in
recent or past years - John Wesley, David Watson perhaps especially spring to mind - have come through times of brokenness. Times when they have learnt to trust in the Father, not in themselves – but that means taking the long view. And that brings me, rather later than you might have hoped or expected, towards today’s scriptures. He passage from Romans 5 is another favourite of mine. It has such movement, and such wisdom. There are no short cuts to maturing in Spirit, becoming who God wants us to be. Those lines etched deep into the features of those we really recognise as wise do not get there by chance, nor are they applied like make up, superficial signs of appearing to be something they are not.

We are called, as the body of Christ, to walk the way of Christ - and that is the way of -suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

This reminds me now of the quote from Mrs Thatcher, in the Iron Lady: Watch your thoughts for they become words. Watch your words for they become actions. Watch your actions for they become... habits. Watch your habits, for they become your character. And watch your character, for it becomes your destiny! What we think we become.

What we are today, is the result of decisions taken yesterday. Will you become like Christ? And now to the gospel, where we see just how profound this message is - that we are caught up into the very life of God - given for the life of the world. This chapter of John’s gospel contains the clearest statement of Trinitarian theology anywhere in scripture. It helps us to understand how the Father sends the Spirit, who in turn brings us the Messiah, Jesus. The Father also sends the Son, who in turn sends us the Spirit. And in this double procession from the Father, the community of God is present in the world, drawing humanity into that perfect fellowship where the truth of each member’s life emerges out of their relationship with each other. It’s called Perichoresis - the Father cannot be the Father without a Son, the Son has to have a Father to know what it is to be a Son ... And the Spirit is that expression if the life of God who binds all together, but whom we can never pin down in a simple definition. The power of God, the wisdom of God, the love of God, all these have been used to describe the Spirit.

There is so much more to be said about the life and work of the Spirit – we need to have a study series on it in the Autumn!

And so, just as the spirit led and equipped Christ, to carry forward the ministry of the Father to reconcile the world to himself, so as we are blessed as the body of Christ we too are led and equipped to play our part in that work of Reconciliation. Christ’s own title, as I’m sure you know, means anointed – another word for blessed. We too are anointed to play our part in God’s great plan of salvation for the world, his great purpose of gathered all people back to himself. If you share in the blessing of this Eucharist, if you receive this bread, be ready to live out the life of Christ in the world. A corporate, not an individual task, but one that requires everyone to make an individual response.

A life that lets the people of this city know that Christ lives, and walks, and speaks, listens and loves among them.

A life that makes this cathedral a sign of the light of heaven, shining here in Coventry. Caught up in the life of the Blessed and Holy Trinity, and revealing their glory in the world. Amen.