It is a great privilege to host this service of thanksgiving for our armed forces, and gather here in the cathedral to honour and pray for them, and their families. It is also a privilege to speak, although a daunting one: in a few minutes, to find the words to say which communicate sufficiently the sense of gratitude and respect which we have for those serving the cause of Peace in our armed forces, and to express our own, shared, commitment to that same cause.

All of us want Peace in the World. That is our common conviction, I hope, here in the cathedral this morning. None of us want war, none of us rejoice in conflict. There is, of course, exhilaration in battle, the opportunity for great acts of self-sacrifice, the satisfaction of a successful campaign. ... But to speak of the ‘glory’ of war is ultimately a mistake, and one which I do not hear on the lips of serving soldiers, sailors or airmen or their families.

Of course, there is much more to the life of a serving member of the Armed Forces than going to war – mercifully, that is only a small part of what is expected of these women and men – but all that they do is in the service of peace, and security, on behalf of the rest of us.

We live in an ‘in between’ time: a time when we look forward to peace, when we often taste it and experience it, but know that it is not yet here for all, all the time. We have a word for it in Christian theology: it is called ‘eschatological’. It literally means, ‘now and not yet’, and it describes the progress towards the Kingdom of God, which is a Kingdom of Peace and Justice, growing and developing in the midst of the troublesome reality of the world. Sometimes that progress seems agonisingly slow. It’s rather like a longed for change in the weather – an image which residents of this country may find easy to understand. It’s like waiting for the patches of sun which have just begun to break through the banks of grey cloud to grow and grow until there is more sunshine than cloud. Some of us, especially walkers, are given to overblown optimism in relation to the British weather, and whether it is going to be worth setting out on that mountain climb which we have been waiting to do all week: members of my family have become accustomed to my tendency to such over-optimism. Occasionally they observe that my gravestone should include the words, “It’s brightening up - look!”

This view of in between time, where things are yet not as they ought to be, but where there are signs of hope, underlies our readings, hymns and prayers today. (It underlies the contrast between the two verses of the hymn we just sung, which spoke of the two countries, one for now, the other forever.) It underlies that wonderful prophecy from Isaiah, which looks ahead to a time when all of creation will discover peace with one another. It underlies, too, the second reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians which acknowledges the reality of a spiritual battle going on within of all of us, and within our own communities, and pointing us to some of the resources which God has given us to deploy: the belt, the protection, of truth; the breastplate, the covering of the body with righteousness (that is, of the gift of good relationships with God and our neighbours); the shoes which makes us swift to proclaim the possibility of Peace; the shield of faith in God, which enables us to trust in a better future, and to stand firm in that hope; the helmet of salvation, which is the love of God made real in our lives and the Sword of the Spirit, which is the perspective of the Word of God, cutting through our limited vision and the barriers we throw up around ourselves and helping us to see clearly. And lastly, but by no means least, the power of prayer: prayer changes things. Mostly, actually, it changes the person who prays: it opens us up to the command and the direction of God, who is our ultimate commander in chief in the battle for peace.

...
This is the equipment of the army of God. This is an army in to which we are all invited to enlist, to serve. No one is excluded from this invitation. An essential part of our support for those who serve us in the armed forces is to play our part in working for Peace and Reconciliation in the world - we don't just leave it up to them. Our job, you might say, is to make their job unnecessary - but until that happens, they need our support and appreciation, our understanding, and our full cooperation in what they are doing.

Rather similarly, this afternoon and tomorrow morning we will be sharing in full cathedral services to ordain men and women to the authorised ministry of the church as deacons and priests. But the work of ministry is not for them alone - is it also true to say that our job is to make their job unnecessary? I'm not so sure - but perhaps I'm too keen on keeping my own job. But the important thing is that we are in this together!

I am extremely proud to belong to the City of Peace and Reconciliation. This cathedral has a vital contribution to make in that identity - indeed, it was Provost Howard's commitment to rebuilding the burned medieval cathedral church which initially gave rise to that title. I am delighted that in their debate on Tuesday afternoon that Coventry City Council unanimously reaffirmed their commitment to that. We all have a part to play in making that a reality, and here in the cathedral we will be looking to gather people together from all of our city and county life to explore what that may mean, starting from the Autumn.

Those in our armed forces dedicate their lives, at great cost to themselves and their families, to building Peace for our nation and our world. We celebrate their dedication today and gather to express our thanks. But let's not leave it up to them: they can't build peace on their own. We all have a part to play in making a kinder, more peaceful, more Christ-child like world: we can seek to show, from this city and county, what it means to work for Peace and Reconciliation at every level of society. The skies are clearing over Coventry: it's brightening up - look!

John Witcombe
Dean of Coventry