I wonder what piece of art your eye is drawn to as you spend time in the cathedral? One of our more accessible pieces is probably the piece in the south aisle, inspired by today’s reading from the prophet Amos. It’s not, in truth, one of my favourite works of art in the cathedral – there’s not much sense of hidden depth – everything it offers is there to see straight away, as it were. But it does challenge, and challenges which disturb, even irritate, are important.

The readings today are challenges, but also like all the challenges in scripture, they are invitations: invitations to live life as God wants it to be lived. In this case, it is an invitation to live at peace with our neighbour, and to discover that in this we touch eternal life. As we put these two readings alongside each other, it may be tempting to think that we need to care for our neighbours as a way of putting ourselves right with God, to earn his blessing: to do this in order to receive that. The passage from Amos, weighing into the way of life practised amongst those who called themselves God’s people, is part of a full blown critique of those who ‘trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land’ – thereby bringing judgement on themselves, and unable to receive God’s blessing. Similarly, the gospel parable is usually read as setting out an obligation to fulfil, a threat to avoid, if we are to do what God wants us to, in order to earn eternal life.

But what if we read it in a slightly different way? To remember to see eternal life as starting now, and lived out in companionable fellowship with God and our neighbour now? Not something distant and remote, which we either earn or fail by our behaviour in the present.

What is eternal life? It is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and to love your neighbour as yourself. This is not what we do in order to buy eternal life, as it were – this is what it means to live eternal life, now. To live out this relationship is to live out life as God wants it lived: to live out love.

This is what God requires of us: and not, presumably just us, but the whole city. On Thursday evening at Cathedral Council, John McGuigan, former Director of City Planning and not someone who would count himself a Christian, strongly affirmed our role in enabling Coventry to be a ‘City at Peace with Itself’. Drawing conclusions from OT texts about what God expects of a secular city in the 21st century may not be reliable: we are not a religiously based society. But if we believe that God is the God of all, what he expects of those who call themselves his people is representative of what he expects of all. What he wants for his people is what he wants of all.

A couple of weeks ago there was a most exciting debate in the council chamber in the Coventry Council House. You can dial into it on the web: the council reaffirmed its commitment to the identity of Coventry as the City of Peace and Reconciliation. Labour and Tory were, wonderfully and perhaps inevitably, falling over themselves in wanting to show that they were equal in this shared aim.

To be moved by Councillor Sawdon and seconded by Councillor Andrews:

“That this Council, recognising that Coventry is renowned both nationally and internationally as the City of Peace and Reconciliation, pledges to continue to develop policies to ensure the inclusion of all its citizens.”

To be moved by Councillor Mrs Lucas and seconded by Councillor Townshend:

“This Council reaffirms its commitment to being a City locally, nationally, and internationally of Peace and Reconciliation. It reaffirms its commitment to treating all of its citizens equally and fairly, without prejudice or discrimination and maintaining the highest bonds of community cohesion.
The City Council commits to continue to work with all individuals and organisations to promote the values set out in this resolution.”

In the end, the two motions were more or less combined. In the debate, there were of course many references to the cathedral. It is the cathedral, and Provost Howard’s words in November 1940, ‘Father Forgive’, that first gave the city its contemporary character – a character quickly embraced, officially at least, as the council in the following years embarked with vigour on its twinning programme with other European cities devastated by war.

Today, I rejoice that council and business leaders in this city are wanting to reaffirm the identity of Coventry as the City of Peace and Reconciliation – and they are looking to the cathedral to help them work out what that means. I - We - have been invited by leaders across the city and region to help put some content to the title. To build that identity for the good of all – because if it’s true, it’s good for business, it’s good for tourism, it’s good for residents ... it’s good for everybody.

Jesus was asked, ‘who is my neighbour’? At the end of the parable, he turns the question back on the enquirer. Today, I think he asks us the same thing: who is your neighbour? Already, as we have been exploring what God may be saying to us in these days we have heard, we believe, that he is wanting to us to put reconciliation right (back) at the heart of this cathedral’s life. Now, it seems, we are being invited to play a central role in putting reconciliation right (back) at the heart of this city’s life. We have the opportunity to bring people together from across the city and region to explore and plan together what this might mean. I have to say, I was excited about coming here, when I arrived back in January, but now I am even more excited. This is where things get real – when they break out from the safety of those who know themselves to be God’s own people into the wider society.

I find myself asking, Is the cathedral a plumb line in the midst of the city – and if so, does it hang straight and true? How does God judge us, and how does he judge the city – not, in grace, for condemnation, but for healing? I found myself reflecting on this role of reconciliation in church and city when I took a cross of nails last week to Odesa, in the Ukraine. It’s a hard life, being Dean of Coventry Cathedral. David Porter was sweating away in York, as an Ulster Baptist, bringing peace and reconciliation to the Church of England trying not to fall out fatally with itself over the matter of women Bishops – and more or less succeeding, so far as we can tell. So I went in his place, as it were, to Odesa, a wonderful city planted on the Black Sea by Catherine the Great, enjoying a heavenly climate but, inevitably, owning a troubled history. I went there to join a small gathering of national representatives from the Community of Cross of Nails leaders in Eastern Europe, and the St. Paul’s Congregation, of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine, who were joining the CCN network, the first church in the Ukraine to do so. The church building served effectively as a cathedral church for the German Lutheran population of the city until Soviet times, then was used variously as a concert hall and a gym, and was gutted by fire, probably started deliberately in 1976. It stood derelict for some 35 years, an eyesore in the centre of the city, before being beautifully rebuilt largely with the support of the Bavarian district of the Lutheran Church. Like our cathedral here in Coventry, it stands as a symbol of new life, of hope and possibility for the future. Like our cathedral, it has extraordinary contemporary art work which brings together ancient and modern, and which deliberately invites exploration and questioning. What appear to be huge paint blots on walls and ceiling are there in the crisp and clean art and architecture to show that we have not got everything neat and tidy in our faith ...

And like our cathedral, it has a senior pastor in Bishop Uland who has questionable taste in 1970’s progressive rock music. It emerged during an opportunity to share a beer together in the bar in the precincts of the church (there’s an idea) that he and I were of almost exactly the same age, with only a few months apart, and our shelves were graced with the same flamboyantly designed gatefold sleeves of all the great symphonic rock giants of or teenage years: Genesis, Uriah Heep, Beggar’s Banquet, Emerson Lake and Palmer and above all, Yes. Out of such things are international friendships forged.

One of the most satisfying parts of the visit was the ecumenical meeting and press conference on the Friday afternoon, when other church leaders and, even more importantly in my mind, local leaders were invited. There were also a couple of delegates from an EU mission to Moldova and Ukraine, working on issues of systemic corruption. Together, this made it possible to stress that the cross of nails was not just being taken to a church community, but to a city: a plumb line, if you like, but not as a threat of judgement, but as an invitation and a promise of grace. The church there already welcomes in its neighbours, both in ecumenical and neighbourhood groups. Part of its building is a contemporary quite of offices rented out to local businesses, and I have already
mentioned the bar run by one of the churchwardens in its precincts. It is a sign of new life, and a sign of community, of neighbourliness.

I had a wonderful time in Odesa. I learnt about new neighbours in Ukraine, and - the other delegates – became my neighbours from Poland, from Prague, from Sibiu in Romania, from St. Petersburg, from Tblisi. They became my neighbours because God brought us together. But the blessings and demands of such brief encounters are, of course short term: of greater challenge, and perhaps of more significance, are the challenges of working out what it means to be good neighbours right where God has placed us in the homes and journeys of our everyday lives. What does it mean to be working out eternal life right here, right now, in building a city of peace and reconciliation here in Coventry? We have been offered an amazing challenge and an incredible opportunity to give reality to working through God’s plan not just for us as a Christian community, but as a city. How would we measure up against God’s plumb line? What would eternal life look like worked out in this city today? How can we see that happen? Let me know your ideas, your dreams and visions: let’s see them become a reality, to God’s glory. Amen.