Today is All Saints’ Sunday. I wonder how many of you would count yourself as saints? How would you make that judgment? Looking around you, what would be the signs that you would look for in others? Those of you who are visitors to the cathedral today, would you see yourselves as saints? Perhaps not? But if not, why not? What is it that defines a saint?

We have a huge West Window in the cathedral which is full of images of angels, and of saints. There’s Augustine, Patrick, David, Andrew and George. There’s Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Michael, of course. John the Baptist, Thomas Becket and Osburga, who founded the first religious house here in Coventry.

What marks them out as saints? The obvious answer, presented through church windows up and down the land, is that they are dead. To be a saint is to be dead – or as good as dead, because you clearly need to be someone who is utterly uninterested in the things of the world, or of this life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Saints are, first and foremost, alive. And they are full of life – so much life, that they want to share it with the rest of the world. The second possible answer is that they are not like us. You and I could never be in that number – could we?

Would you want to be a saint? Do you think you are cut out for it? Would you want your friends to see you as a saint – or do you think that would mean you would lose them as friends? Today’s readings from scripture are addressed to saints, and those who might want to be saints. If we start with the gospel, we find Jesus describing saints, those who follow his teaching, as those who are ‘Blessed’ – those who have everything they need, and know it, those who are full of joy, and contentment. They are those who are able to live generously, not grasping anything for themselves, but living with open hands and hearts, ready to give, and to receive. This is the heart of sainthood: to live generously.

None of us can live generously until we have learned to receive generosity for ourselves – and this is where the possibility of sainthood resides. It starts not in our behavior, but in God’s. Not in our self-giving, but in God’s. Not in our love for God, or even for our neighbours, but in his love for us, and for the world – we are all invited to become a part of that vast overflowing joyful love of God which reaches out to the world through Jesus Christ and draws all people back to him. Saints are, simply, those who have chosen to be part of that great tide of returning to God and his infinite love – and in so doing, inviting others to join them, who have responded in honest repentance and faltering faith. We have a particular part to play in that flow back to God here in Coventry because of our history – how we learned, and then were able to share with others, the reality of Christ’s presence with us even in the midst of death and destruction, and how even that would not defeat the ultimate hope of God for all.

What does that mean for us in practice? I was pondering this a little on Friday morning as I flew back from a week’s holiday. It was not a premium flight, and leg room was limited. I found myself in a familiar dilemma – should I recline my seat, giving me some additional space and allowing me to doze a little more comfortably, or would this cause inconvenience and distress to the passenger sitting behind me? I’m sure that others share that concern – but clearly, not everyone. Is the world of air travelers split into those who recline with impunity, and those who stay nobly upright? And are the latter more saintlike than the former? Or what of those who like me, who ultimately recline a little, having first fretted about the impact on the person behind them of reclining, and seeking to balance that against the inconvenience caused to themselves of not doing so. Oh – life is full of these small dilemmas!
Sainthood is surely pursued in the course of such decisions. Every small choice we make takes us into or away from the path of sainthood. But it is also true that the small decisions can distract us from the really big ones that we are called to make: we can fail to see, as it were, the wood for the trees. The little worries we have about whether to give up a seat on the bus to someone else, whether to stop to pick up a piece of litter which has accidentally fallen from a pocket – whether, in other words, to suffer minor inconveniences for the sake of our consciences, or what others may think of us – can blind us to the huge, life changing decisions that we are faced with in the Gospel.

The big decision that we are called to make is whether to turn to live our lives in response to the overwhelming generosity of God. On our own resources, we cannot live for others – we simply don’t have what it takes. But God does, and if we live for others as part of his living for others, that can really make a difference. And we can keep on doing it – keep on living, and loving, and hoping because we are living, loving and hoping with the life, love and hope of God flowing through us and around us into the world.

We are called to build, with God’s help, a new community – a community of saints. A community where all are welcome – even those whom we might have counted as our enemies – and which will continue for eternity. That actually is what we’re about here – nothing less than a plan to change the world. To become a world in which we no longer have to send drones to far off countries to kill those with whom we might be in negotiation. To become a world in which we pick up a phone, or speak face to face with those whom we might have sent an angry email, to seek resolution. Near, or far. Of course, this is quite difficult to do. In fact, it’s impossible simply by our own resources, because we would feel vulnerable and exposed. It only becomes possible once we see ourselves as part of a greater story: and this is precisely the challenge of the gospel.

The challenge of the gospel is the challenge that says, “it’s not all about you” – neither is it all about “them”, but in the end, it’s all about God, and God loves everyone. There’s a horrible phrase which has become commonplace in recent years – after an apparently unpalatable opinion has been stated as truth, it is followed by the words, “get over it”. But this is probably an occasion to use it: “God loves everyone … get over it!” Saints are those who have embraced this truth – and so have chosen to live their lives in uncomplicated commitment to God and those whom he loves … which is, of course, everyone.

Abraham Lincoln said, in the wake of the American Civil War, “My concern is not whether God is on our side – my greatest concern is to be on God’s side.” (Quoted by Jim Wallis at this year’s Greenbelt festival, and the title of his most recent book exploring the Common Good.)

Saints are those who seek above all to be part of what God is doing, part of God’s story rather than their own. In the end, that’s a story which is a lot more interesting, a lot more satisfying – and a lot longer. Eternal, in fact. And open to all.

That is the message which I hope people get when they come into this cathedral. It’s a space which is big enough – especially with the poignancy of the ruins – for honesty, to hold our sorrows and help us to face them … but in the end it is a place to lift our eyes, our hearts and our minds, to awe and wonder, and then to celebrate. As we stand at the West Screen, by the Chi-Rho symbol of Christ’s presence in the floor, with the glory of the Baptistery Window to our right, and the face of Christ in the tapestry flanked by the symbolic creatures from Revelation ahead of us, we know that the story is greater than the little that we can see around us at any one time.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians paints a great picture of this wonderful hope to which we are called. He knows that it’s almost beyond our power to grasp, and so he prays that God will “open the eyes of our hearts” to catch a sense of the incredible wonder of what he is about in the world, opening up a new community, a new family for all to be part of through Christ.
To offer ourselves to love others so completely will only spring from knowing ourselves completely loved first. It’s not then so much an act of sacrifice – rather, of saying that we have been invited to a great celebration, and it will be even better if you are there too. In fact, the more the better.

And so today I offer you a call to holiness – to complete devotion to God and his love. A call to service – to complete devotion to our neighbours and their love. A call to sainthood. A call to eternal life.