A church council was discussing whether they should put a sign on their church door – I think they had been asked to do so by the diocese, or perhaps the insurance company. The sign was large, and luminous, and said “Thieves Beware”. The parish priest was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, and in the end she spoke out: “I think we should have a large sign saying, ‘Thieves Welcome’”.

I was told that story last weekend, and it’s stayed with me and cheered me up all week – and then I looked at today’s readings. They are, of course, Coventry readings – we have one of the classic reconciliation texts in the Epistle, from Colossians, and the ‘Father Forgive’ reading from the passion narrative in the second.

They take us right into a reflection on the life and ministry of this cathedral, and our unique calling. Almost a year in, and if anything I am even more excited about this tug of God upon us to play our part in his work in the church, and in the world, than I was when I arrived.

Our task is to lead the way in reversing the popular narrative – the narrative that says to others, “keep away”, and which says to ourselves, “we need to be careful”. It is our calling, says Paul, to model patience and thanksgiving, always prick the bubble of fear of the other, knowing that our confidence lies in God and in our share in the inheritance of the Saints – which is the Kingdom of God. It is a Kingdom which gets better and bigger the more join in – it’s a Kingdom to be shared, not barricaded. A kingdom which is entered not so much through righteousness and reward, as forgiveness – through honest admission of need, not pretense of perfection.

How is this possible? What is the basis of the offer that we make, that all are welcome? It can be easy, in the heady world of forging new and exciting partnerships with the in the city, those from many and diverse traditions, to think that the way forward is simply about being friendly, open … nice. Of course, I hope that we are exactly that. (We’re not always, by the way – perhaps because we’re not perfect - but it doesn’t mean we should stop trying.) It was a delight on Wednesday morning of last week to welcome senior leaders from across the city and out into the region to a Dean’s breakfast in St. Michael’s House. We invited 48 people, and were glad that only 36 could make it, coming together for a good discussion about what it meant to be a City of Peace and Reconciliation and how to give both a high public – perhaps international profile – to that identity, but also to give it real traction on the ground. We had a dozen real, concrete actions which will be going forward, and strong affirmation from those attending, from the chief executive of the council, to the vice chancellor of the university, the editor of the Coventry Telegraph, and leaders and officers from health, education, business present.

It wasn’t the time to be doing theology – at least, not out loud. But I do believe that good, robust theology needs to underlie an event like that. Theology is the study of what God is up to in the world – and good theology helps us to reflect on the part we are called to play in that. So here’s the theology behind the Dean’s breakfast: ‘Jesus Christ is before all things, and in him all things hold together … in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.’

In other words, God is reaching out into the world – his world, as it happens, joining back together that which has become separated, creating a new Kingdom with Jesus Christ at the centre. I spend a lot of time around the city at networking events these days – and I really enjoy it. I hope it’s neither facetious nor
blasphemous to say that God is the ultimate networker. He really wants to be joined to everyone – and wants everyone to be joined to everybody else. There’s no limit to the number of cards he’s give out (and what text do you think he would have written on them – and what’s his address?) You could say that if the Big Bang theory is how people describe the science of the first creation, the new creation of which Christians speak is a sort of reverse of that – when that which is flying eternally apart, starts flying eternally together again.

Today is the feast of Christ the King in our liturgical year. The day when we acknowledge that Christ is everything he is revealed to be in the tapestry behind me: great, and glorious, and with all creation and all creatures gathered around and before him. He is the first born in all creation, and is creation’s ultimate King. If this was a film, he would be a colossus, striding through the land festooned with weaponry and with trophies of his conquests hanging from his belt and trailing behind him. This is everything of which the first reading, the Epistle, speaks.

Well, except the last few words. Making peace by the blood of his Cross. Kingship and authority in the narrative of history is usually established through the blood of the victor’s enemies, not through their own. All things have been reconciled through Christ’s blood, not ours, nor our enemies, whoever they may be. This gospel message is made physical and turned into historical narrative, in the gospel reading. Here is our King, establishing his place in history not through the triumphant and visible defeat of others, but apparently through the defeat and failure of himself. But the clues to interpret this account are, like all good detective stories, in the narrative itself: Jesus is mocked by those looking on, saying, “let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God”. Well, the Messiah of God does not have to save himself, because that’s God’s task – and so Christ rises triumphantly from death three days later, raised by the God to whom he commits himself and the thief beside him in his dying moments on the cross. This is the character of the Kingdom – a Kingdom where we do not rely on our own efforts to defeat our enemies, but rather upon God, who turns our enemies into our friends.

I love the fact that the first person promised paradise is a criminal, a thief. It does make you think.

So what has this all to do with our partnerships in the city? Let me tell you a little story. A few weeks ago, I spat down to talk to Paul, who supports chaplaincy to those in and looking for work. That led to us talking about a Job Club in the city centre, and offering cathedral space to do it. But we couldn’t do it, because as we thought through all the possible spaces, none of them were quite right. But a few days later, I was talking to Keith, who leads another large church in the city. Perhaps we could do it together, we thought? But we still didn’t have the space. Then we were exploring the cathedral’s vision at the community morning, and a group of people said they would really like to help: well, this was getting silly, because now we really had some people, and a vision, but no space. Then I met Gavin, who runs the food bank. We were both in a meeting, and had been looking forward to getting together – from what we’d heard, we’d thought it might go quite well. So, we got chatting and Keith and Gav and I went out for a curry. Well, it turned out that Gavin had just heard about the first floor of the old Waterstones shop overlooking Broadgate which could be available for both for a foodbank distribution, one stop advice shop, and Job Club. Bingo. Well – not quite, of course – but that’s the way it works in the Kingdom of God. Joining people together for the good of others, for the good of themselves, for the growth of the Kingdom.

That’s the work of the Spirit who brings in the Kingdom – joining, creating. What does it mean to say ‘Christ is King’? – it means that he can be King wherever he is invited (and one day will be revealed whether invited or not) – and he is happy to have anyone in his Kingdom. He’s King of the ruins. King of the City. King of the cathedral. King of the Universe. King of your life, and mine – reconciling all things into his Kingly rule.

And oh – he’s king, not you, or me. It’s not my call on who’s in, or out. Hard, as a Dean. It’s our job together to discern what he is saying to us. But what we do know, from the teaching of scripture, is that there’s no one who doesn’t belong, who doesn’t get an invitation. Thieves welcome!