Someone said to me this time last week, “I’m a bit Mandela’d out, to be honest.” I don’t know if you’re here this morning – if so, I apologise, because I think there is still much to learn from continuing to reflect on his life, and continuing to put our Advent cycle of readings alongside the narrative of his life, and ours - to allow ourselves to be judged, and inspired, as we prepare for the coming celebration of Christmas.

As I read the Isaiah reading earlier this week, describing the highway running through the desert places, it brought to my mind those images from 1994 of lines of people snaking through the bushes, through the townships, through the sand and the scrub as men and women waiting in the sun to cast their vote for the first time in their lives. That was an image of a highway to freedom, to a new future. It’s true that the freedom then has to be lived out – but there was a new beginning.

That new beginning started, somehow, in prison when a political activist, who had resolved to live, or if necessary to die, for the freedom of all people in South Africa, found his heart and mind opening, expanding, to really embrace the promise of freedom for all. Not just for those who had been oppressed, but also for their oppressors.

This is such a Coventry story. It’s the flip side of our own ‘Father Forgive’ narrative, that confesses solidarity in failure, in sin and guilt: all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This time the story is about hope: the future is for everyone, for all. (Just as Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “Even so in Adam all died, even so in Christ shall all be made alive”.)

As he headed into freedom after 27 years in captivity, Nelson Mandela said, “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison. … You will achieve more in this world through acts of mercy than you will through acts of retribution.” When we live in fear, we make prisons for ourselves, and we imprison others. When we live in freedom, our freedom has the potential of freeing others, too.

Mandela was transformed by his years in prison. He never lost his commitment to live – or if necessary, to die – for what he believed was right, for justice and freedom for all South African people, regardless of race or colour. But he matured in his commitment. He matured to the point where he took his bearings from a greater horizon, not where he won, but where everyone won. That’s true freedom. And it’s appropriate that this lesson is learned in Africa, where the people understand the concept of Ubuntu: I am because we are. You probably know it – and if not, ponder it. We only become persons in relationship with others – and eternally, in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In the West, identity is so caught up with proving our worth by winning, by being better, by being the best, by putting others below us. In Africa, at its best, identity is something which is shared. So, unless everyone wins, no-one wins.

Do you know, the more I have pondered Mandela this week, the more I have come to realise just how remarkable he was. Mandela was an extraordinary figure – presiding over the last days of the twentieth century. But will what he started continue – in South Africa, in the rest of the world? Somehow, he learned how not to live in fear. He was able to see a vision for a new future, one to share with all – even, perhaps especially, those who had been his enemies, those whom his companions would have said were to be feared, to be shunned, to be avoided – to be shut out of the new circle of friendship and fellowship.
I have been away on retreat this week, on the Northumbrian Coast. One of the things about retreat is that you never know what will come out of it – almost like being in voluntary prison, locked away from normal interaction, your heart and mind is, paradoxically, free. Free to explore unfamiliar territory unencumbered by emails and appointments. To dream dreams and see visions. Well I’d like to tell you one of mine. It’s of a great banquet, here in the cathedral. A banquet for all. From the leaders of the city, and the churches, to those whom they are called and appointed to serve – the lowest to the highest, the nearest to the farthest, the neighbours who we see but don’t know. Maybe those of us who could afford it could pay not just for ourselves, but for those who can’t. Perhaps those who feel confident coming to such an event could all be tasked with bringing someone who wouldn’t. We could call it the big banquet. Or St. Michael’s Feast – with angels on the door. Perhaps we could have singing from school children, and also from professional artists. Maybe we could have a famous chef devising the menu – or perhaps a granny from Foleshill. It might just be fanciful thinking. An undigested piece of cheese, as Scrooge would say. But maybe it’s real. A sign of the Kingdom.

John sent messengers from prison to Jesus to ask – is it really you? He had known, had believed – had baptized Jesus and pointed him out others. Now he was wavering in his faith. Small wonder. He was in prison, things were not looking good. He needed something beyond just fine words. So Jesus sent back his followers with the news: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me. When Jesus is taken seriously things change.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Coventry Way ... it will be a road for healing the wounds of history, as we walk together. It will be a road to learn about each other and to revel in our diversity. It will be a place to talk, as we walk, about how we are going to build a culture of peace.

This is the legacy of Mandela, of the work that the Holy Spirit of God was doing in and through him: creating hope for the people of South Africa as a sign of hope in the world. Make no mistake, it’s not an easy, or a cheaply won hope – it took years of transfigured suffering in prison for Mandela to have his eyes opened to the only way forward. And there is still truth that needs to be told in South Africa, mercy to be offered, reconciliation to be found.

So what are the stories from the streets of Coventry this Christmas time? Is there evidence of change, difference? Evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in our midst? Evidence of the sort of change we have seen in South Africa?

President Obama said at the celebration of Mandela’s life on Tuesday: “It took a man like Madiba to free not just the prisoner, but the jailer as well. To show that you must trust others so that they may trust you; to teach that reconciliation is not a matter of ignoring a cruel past, but a means of confronting it with inclusion, generosity and truth. He change laws, but also hearts.”

Mandela was a true prophet. He could see a different future, God’s future, and he was able to help others see it, and live their lives into it. As we celebrate his life today, and again this afternoon in our special service, we are offered once again an opportunity to commit ourselves to a new vision, to live our lives into that future where all know themselves loved and accepted, with a contribution to make.

If John was to send messengers from prison to Coventry to discover whether we were what we claimed to be – a cathedral witnessing to Christ, and in particular his message of peace and reconciliation – what would be the report? By God’s grace, as we offer ourselves to him, he will do so much more amongst us and make his Kingdom known, here in Coventry.