I don’t think I have ever been so aware of buildings since moving to Coventry. Partly the whole business of working out how a new home works - I love Number 8, but I have to say it has the wonkiest floors and walls I ever lived with. We have repeating decisions about things like whether to hang a picture straight according to a spirit level, or whether we follow the line of the wall and ceiling .... in fact I no longer really know what ‘straight’ means, but that could be a whole other sermon. And of course, not just the house, but this building, which in fact I don’t notice nearly so much from my windows as I do the old cathedral, the ruins that we look out on. I live, and we worship on the edge of hill top– I’m sure you know that churches named after St Michael are always built on hill tops.....  Jesus says in that gospel reading -  a city built on a hill cannot be hidden. Cities are made up of buildings, often defined by them.

I have spent the last 8 years living in Gloucester, another city known for its cathedral. When I went to my new dentist last week he asked me where I’d moved from and then said, ‘Gloucester? That’s posh isn’t it?’ And I said, ‘Well the cathedral is quite posh – the rest of the city really isn’t.’ And yet it can hide its ordinariness in the shadow of the glorious and ancient cathedral.

There is a lot about hiding in scripture. Sometimes it is seen as a good thing – read the psalms about hiding under the shadow of god’s wings; read in Paul’s letters about how our lives are hidden with Christ in god – and sometimes it’s criticised– think of the parable of the talents, where the man is chastised for hiding the money he was given to invest. In the words we hear today, we’re called not to hide, but to expose ourselves. And in exposing ourselves, or rather the things that we do, we find what is actually seen, is God our father. (And interestingly, this is the first time in Matthew’s gospel that we hear Jesus call god father – it would have sounded shocking to his first listeners. Underlying all this instruction about how we should live, is the understanding of god as our parent, the one who brings us to life and who loves us unconditionally)

What I hear in these words of Jesus is a command to be seen. If I were preaching this sermon in Gloucester, I would say, do you know about Coventry cathedral? I would tell them the story of November 1940, and I would say there stand the ruins, on a hill, for all to see. And because they are ruins you can see straight through them to the city and to the new cathedral, built as a sign of commitment to reconciliation. Let your light shine before others – this is just what these buildings do.

But we’re not in Gloucester, we are here in the place of that story. And so I want to take this a step deeper than the buildings, into our own lives, as community and as individuals. Because I guess the danger always is, with such a powerful story as ours, with such powerful buildings, that we can find we deflect its power from our lives, we go on telling the story and forget to listen to it. Jesus says, you are salt, you are light, not to be ineffective, not to be hidden but to be seen. I wonder, if you were to pick one of these two buildings – the old cathedral, the new one – to describe yourself, which would you choose? And if you were to seek to hide yourself in one – where would you go? It would seem that the safest place on that November night was in fact the most exposed bit – that huge tower, which stands, like our house, not quite straight.

Most of us have quite a lot to hide. Many if not most of us, I would guess, live with a bit of a fear of being found out. I know I do. In a way that building behind us stands as a symbol of one who has been found out. It hides nothing. There’s a beautiful worship song - Empty, broken, here I stand .... Lord have mercy.
In his earthy, ordinary, almost kitchen images – salt, light – Jesus draws out how essential we, his people, the church, are to the world. And he calls us to stand up and allow ourselves to be what God calls us to be. He doesn’t call us to be perfect, but he does call us to play our part. The world needs salt, the world needs light – and however broken and spoilt we may be, whether by our own doing or because of what others have done to us, we hold that light within us. Don’t hide, says Jesus. Stand up, shine.

The gospel goes on to talk about the law, the tradition into which Jesus was born – our old testament and more. Jesus doesn’t wipe all that out, but by his life, and his death, he shines light on it – shows why it matters, what it’s for. And it’s about the kingdom of heaven, God’s kingdom, the life that God desires all should know, all be part of. And we, the church, are called to play our part in building it. Let your light shine. Let the salt that you are give flavour. Be who you are.

What does all this mean? We get a lot of clues from the Isaiah reading. Again, even though written so many years before the gospel, they speak of not hiding. It’s both about doing the acts of justice and kindness, and about revealing yourself, who you are, before others. When you see the naked – cover them. And don’t hide yourself from your own kin. And its in that mix of doing good – my friend has a postcode in her kitchen that says ‘practise random acts of kindness’ – of course the world needs more than that, but it’s a start – and taking off the cloaks that hide the light we carry.. Cloaks of shame, failure, boredom – all the stuff that makes us want to hide. Getting out from under the bushel basket.

And even at home – we can choose kindness. Phone that relative who loves to talk so much .... Or write a card or letter. I’ve been writing letters recently – such a small thing to do, but can have such a big effect. I wrote to an elderly woman last week – she wrote back, saying, ‘Ricarda you could have had no idea how perfectly timed your letter was...’ these small acts of kindness open our hearts to the bigger acts of love, mercy and justice.

It’s a mixture of recognizing that we too have a part to play – and that we depend on God’s mercy and need to return again and again, to hide ourselves in the shadow of God’s wing, that we may again stand up and shine. Then you shall call, says Isaiah, and the lord will answer. You’ll cry for help, and he’ll say here I am. There’s even more in Isaiah, a clear connection between doing good – letting your light shine – and receiving good, healing, life from God.

I want to end, perhaps not so obviously, with some words from Leonard Cohen. A Jew, one who might be familiar with Isaiah at least. A friend scribbled these words down for me on a scrap of paper one time after I’d been bemoaning how useless I felt. I keep it by my bed:

Ring the bells you still can ring.
Forget the perfect offering.
There’s a crack in everything:
that is how the light gets in.

But I would add: by the grace of God, it’s also how the light gets out.