Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

At first I would like to bring you warm greetings from Berlin and our Protestant Emperor Wilhelm Memorial Church in the centre of the city, where I am the vicar. We have a close connection to your Cathedral through the community of the Cross of Nails and the international work of reconciliation. Both our churches suffered a similar history during the war. Both were destroyed by bombings. But after the war, both were preserved in ruined form as a memorial against war.

Our ruined tower with its broken spire rapidly became a city landmark. And our new church was consecrated only a few months before your new Cathedral, in December 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was built. Every Friday, at exactly the same time as you here in Coventry, we pray the Litany of Reconciliation in Berlin. Every Friday our thoughts go out to you while we remember the terrible Coventry blitz and German responsibility. With the Litany of reconciliation we ask for forgiveness together with all the guests, who are visiting our church.

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be able to speak to you.

In the following, the focus shall be the story in the gospel of Matthew we have already heard as a reading:

Who do people say that the Son of Man is? What do people say about me? Jesus asked. People say this, people say that, people say a lot: “Some say John the Baptist”. Like John, Jesus is a sort of moral authority for them, someone who remembers the commandments of God and appeals for repentance and change.

Others say Elijah. Elijah had struggled for the exclusive worship for JAHWE. For people who answered in this way, Jesus is, like Elijah, a religious and political revolutionary. Others say Jeremiah. Jeremiah is known for his intensive and very personal prayers, his so-called confessions. He was an inconvenient prophet and was persecuted.

In your ministry, dear ordination candidates, as priests in parishes or wherever you will work, you will be confronted with a great diversity of convictions and creeds. Who Jesus really is for people, what he means for their lives will be very different. And it is certainly important to listen very carefully to their opinions. Because in the answers people find for themselves, a lot of their own biography resonates: which religious background they come from, what they have experienced and suffered. In the narration of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus allows all opinions to stand. He doesn’t comment or correct them. Rather such questions lead people to the ultimate question: Who do you say that I am?

In your ordination it is – as for the disciples of Jesus at that time – not so important what others think and believe. It is much more significant to clarify firstly for yourself the question of Jesus: Who do you say that I am? Ordination is a very personal point in life, where our own belief is in the focus. What is it I want to be predicated on? What is my basis?
You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. That’s a great confession! It is a decisive moment when Peter recognises and proclaims this. You are for me the person who fulfils the hopes of people over the centuries. You are the Messiah, the Christ. In you, God comes very close to me. In you, and so, at the same time in God, all my trust, my power and my strength are based.

But Peter, who is able here to speak in that clear way, is that same Peter who in other situations is very weak, shows great fear and makes grave mistakes. Shortly before this scene the gospel tells us how Peter, full of enthusiasm, wants to approach Jesus at the lake. But at that moment as he becomes aware of the strong contrary wind – as told in the very figurative story – he loses his foothold and sinks. He is out of his depth.

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. So says the same Peter who makes the wrong decision and pulls his sword during the capture of Jesus – as the gospel of John tells us. Jesus admonishes him by saying: Put your sword away.

And last but by no means least: Peter, who speaks such great words here of certainty and recognition, is the same Peter who sits during Jesus’s interrogation in the courtyard and cannot find in that moment the strength to give the merest expression to even an acquaintance with Jesus.

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.

In the Lutheran church, this narration about Peter as rock of the church is just as in your Anglican tradition the gospel reading on 29th of June, the day of St. Peter and St. Paul. And beyond this it is read every year on Whit Monday, during Pentecost, the feast of the foundation of the church. What sort of church are we, can we be, do we want to be?

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven says Jesus to Peter.

Martin Luther understood these words as the mandate Jesus gave to us to grant each other forgiveness, if forgiveness is desired; to grant each other consolation and to make the grace of God tangible. It is the mission for us all, but especially for the ordained, to show people ways to deal with guilt and failure.

With this in mind, the promise of Jesus to Peter, namely, I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven acquires a deeper meaning and explains why we remember this promise on the feast day of both saints, St. Peter and St. Paul. Paul emphasised time and again that the kingdom of heaven and a vivid, trustful relationship to God can only open up if people experience that they are beloved, absolute and without condition despite all their mistakes and guilt. When they feel that they stand in God’s grace, they are justified in the eyes of God.

Dear Ordination candidates, dear sisters and brothers,

What church are we, can we be, do we want to be?

For me church is full of spirit when we manage to create the space where people find answers for themselves to Jesus’s question: Who do you say that I am?

Church is full of spirit when we admit how often mistakes are made and we stand over our faults and can say: Father, forgive me. Thinking of our both destroyed churches, it is so evident that the Christian community is as weak, as fearful, as guilty as Peter himself, as that rock on which the church is founded.
And church is full of spirit when we use the keys of the kingdom of heaven and the great responsibility that is given to us with them, to help people to feel they are God’s beloved children despite everything.

Amen  A cathedral is a remembering sort of place. “Do this in remembrance of me” said Jesus. The altar here is a place of remembrance. What do Christians remember? We remember that in Jesus God becomes a weak and defenceless infant, living a human life. This child called Jesus still fascinates, draws millions of followers around the world and speaks of the wonder of love. The child Jesus grew into a man, taught his followers to love their enemies and made many enemies in the process. He faced execution. His mother Mary sees him die on a cross. Mary knew what it was to be a bereaved parent. And if, as Christians have always believed, this child was the son of God, then God himself knows the experience of a bereaved parent too. And that is a great mystery. If there is a comfort in religion, it is that God knows what you and I have experienced. It is the greatest mystery of all.