Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

St. Peter and St. Paul – both represent different ways of faith and mission. But nevertheless we commemorate both great Apostles today, not separately, but rather together. That is for me highly symbolic of the unity of our church. St. Peter – more the representative for the roman-catholic church. St. Paul – more intensively drawn upon during Reformation as the theological foundation.

That I am allowed to preach as Lutheran pastor together with my roman-catholic colleague in your Anglican Cathedral is very special for me. I thank very warmly for this invitation.

We remember the Apostles Peter and Paul and at the same time we celebrate the ordination of women and men as Deacons. Over the past few days it was moving to participate in your ordination retreat and to have the possibility to enter into a conversation with you about theological issues. What does the Christian faith mean to me? Which notion of God do I have? Who is Jesus Christ for me?

That last question was also raised in the reading from the gospel of Matthew. In the story Jesus asked his disciples, indeed he still asks the people who are closest to him and who want to centre their life in Jesus. Who do you say that I am? This is a very personal question because it can’t be answered only by pointing to others, or by simply saying what others think or believe. Our own faith is in question.

This incident, not far away from the Sea of Galilee, is a turning point in the life of the disciples with Jesus. Their experiences up to now with this man will be condensed and summarised in this first statement of belief. They had heard him preaching, they had witnessed healings of the sick and possessed. They had experienced how Jesus had spoken with and about other people. Jesus had given them time to reflect. But now they should form their own opinion and articulate it. Who do you say that I am?

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 of Nazareth.

Peter, the great Apostle, the rock on which Jesus wants to build his church, is clearly marked, again and again, as one who falls short of his own ideals, who makes great mistakes, who is guilty. This mirrors our experience as a Christian community, as the Church. Also our lives, both the personal and the life of our church as a whole is marked with meanders, fault and failure. There isn’t any life which is completely free of it. If even Peter, the rock, so obviously reaches time and again his own limits, this is no surprised that is also true for us. But Peter makes the salutary experience: faults will be forgiven. Do you love me? The risen Jesus Christ asks Peter at the very end of the Gospel of John. And after Jesus repeated the question two times and Peter answered in the affirmative, Jesus reaffirms his faith in Peter by saying: Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.

Peter remains the rock, he remains he who has the full trust of Jesus, he remains Peter who is going to spread the faith and take responsibility for other people. He remains the rock – despite his weakness, his fear, and his flaws.

What an encouragement for you, as newly ordained who are about to take responsibility for our church, for parishes and for people.

Peter remains the rock – despite his weakness, his fear, and his flaws. And this is the point where it is very meaningful to think also of that other great Apostle: Paul.

What Peter experienced in his own life – to fall short of his own ideals, to be guilty but also to gain forgiveness – Paul reflects on in a theological way.

Therefore both Apostles who are so different belong very closely together.

For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans.

Who do you say that I am? Paul perhaps would answer: In Jesus Christ God encounters me because in Him I experience forgiveness and this leads to reconciliation.

For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. These words open the Litany of reconciliation that we pray every Friday at the same time in the ruin of Coventry Cathedral and in the centre of the city of Berlin. I stand in the ruined tower of the Emperor Wilhelm Memorial church and often scores of guests of the city, tourists, are gathered at the Cross of Nails. I tell about the air raid at Coventry in November 1940. I tell about the immense suffering Germans brought over your city and so many other cities, towns and villages. And at the same time – while standing in the ruined tower – it is so visible and tangible that the violence of the Germans returned.

The circuit of violence and counter violence, the human web of guilt, the complicity is so poignantly perceivable.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. With these words the Litany of reconciliation ends. It expresses the experience of St. Peter that Christ forgave him. It is the experience of St. Paul that in Christ God is present as he who shows ways for reconciliation.
On this foundation our church stands. On this foundation the unity of our church can be brought forward. Amen.