May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before I go any further I would like to say thank you for such a tremendous welcome! To Bishop Christopher and Dean John, to everyone here today in this cathedral. And a huge thank you too to all those who have travelled to be here with us today and the parts you have played in this service...not to mention getting me here! ..I so much appreciate all your support.

The last few weeks have been a bit of a whirlwind of transition, of moving homes and offices, of packing and unpacking, and of getting to grips with the Coventry ring road!.... So it is very good this afternoon to be given my stall, somewhere to sit down! If, in the next weeks and months, you ever can’t find me – that is where I will be! Because the view from that seat – from all our seats in fact in this great cathedral church – is remarkable...look around you. (Pause)...From the medieval ruins where the journey begins, through the saints and angels on the west screen, to the great tapestry....but my eye is drawn back always to that cross of nails hanging over the altar...

And today, appropriately enough is Holy Cross Day. I won’t go into the historical origins of Holy Cross day now, but it is a day for celebrating the Cross (in a post-resurrection way that would be inappropriate on Good Friday) as a sign of Christ’s final victory over death, and as a reminder of his promise that we find in John’s gospel ‘And when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself’.

So today we commemorate, we remember something that happened 2000 years ago.

Well, I could stop there, and go back and sit in my stall, and gaze at the cross of nails. And look back to commemorate, to remember.

But the cross of Jesus hangs above our altar, today, in 2014. What does this cross mean for us here, today, in our context? Because we cannot only remember, and look back, although clearly we must not forget the past. We must truly re-member and learn from it. But we cannot stop there, we must not be held prisoner by the past.

Provost Howard in 1940, looking at the destruction around him after the bombing, took the bold decision to not only re-member the past but to look forward when he held the two charred pieces of wood from the ruins and said, ‘Father forgive’. This wonderful new cathedral was built and they looked forward with hope to a new time of peace and reconciliation. And we here today in 2014? How do we look forward?...

So how do we look forward from here with that hope with which the new cathedral was built? Well, to look forward we need to truly see what is happening today, in order to make an attempt to understand where we are being called forward on this great journey with God.
So if we are to really look at that cross of nails hanging over the altar, what do we see? Listen to what St Ephraim of Syrian, one of the early desert fathers, saw in the cross. He saw that

‘The Cross is the staff for the lame. The Cross is comfort for the poor. The Cross is the hope of those who despair. The Cross is haven for the bestormed. The Cross is light for those sitting in darkness. The Cross is freedom for slaves, wisdom for the ignorant. The Cross is bread for the hungry, a fountain for the thirsty.’

The cross is all those things...then, and now. But I am the kind of person who as a child was always thinking, or saying, ‘Yes, but how?’ And ‘Why?’ And I haven’t stopped asking those questions, I’m afraid!... So, for instance, how does the cross become the staff for the lame? Or the light of reconciliation for those in the darkness of conflict?

Let me share with you one of the best answers to these questions that I have found. Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian, addresses these realities of brokenness and of hope in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, one of the finest books about reconciliation I have read. I can’t quite believe that I have got so far into this sermon and only just mentioned reconciliation...!

Volf writes that in order to address the problems we face in our world of exclusion and difference, of hatred and misuse of power over those who are not like us, that there is a need for a cross centred act of relationship, or what he calls ‘the embrace of reconciliation’. This ‘drama of embrace’ encapsulates four moments: opening the arms, (do action), waiting, closing the arms, and opening them again. Let me explain.

In this cross shaped embrace, firstly, opening the arms signifies a reaching out for relationship with the other, a desire for a sharing of myself with the other. (do the action) Secondly, waiting signifies ‘non-invasion’. My desire has been made clear, now it is up to you, ‘the other’ to respond. Thirdly, in closing the arms, the goal of the embrace is reached, and it must be reciprocal, but not overpowering or unequal. Fourthly, the final act of opening the arms again needs to happen if one’s boundary is not to become subsumed into the other.

This final opening of the arms also allows for further embrace as we look forward to the future.

This embrace of reconciliation then is what we can see in the cross...this movement from exclusion to embrace that Jesus embodies for us all. When I was working in South Africa, it was the embrace between an elderly black woman, and a young white man who had planted the bomb which injured her, that was the catalyst for a reconciliation process which drew in a whole town. When she went to meet him in prison, she said, ‘Come here my boy, I forgive you’, as she opened her arms to him.

But crucially, if we look at the cross again, we see that it hangs outstretched over the altar – the place where we bring our brokenness, our struggles with each other, our need for forgiveness, our hope of the resurrection. Christ’s love for us on the cross is what we can see, what we can experience, what is embodied for us in the bread and wine, what we are tasked to share with the other...even as we disagree with them. This is what enables us to look forward in hope.

It is only when we allow ourselves to risk truly seeing what and how the cross is...and it is risky... that we can we start to offer what has been called an ‘adequate response to the tragic nature of experience’, to start to deal with the reality of conflict, of exclusion, of brokenness. The altar embodies reconciliation through this cross shaped embrace.
When I left South Africa, I organised a Reconciliation Eucharist, a communion service, to say thank you to the people I had been working with. One of the ladies from the black township baked the bread, one of the white wine farmers brought his wine, and we all came together to bring the divisions, conflicts, hurts to the altar. We reflected on the cross shaped realities of the need for on-going reconciliation and how hard it was. But we brought it all together to the altar, where these cross shaped realities are embodied, seen, embraced.

Reconciliation is hard and it is not fast. It is cross shaped. And it needs to be embodied through the realities of relationship with God and with each other we come to share at the altar.

Reconciliation is costly and it is often convoluted. But it is possible. Ian Paisley – one of the most complex leaders of our times – knew that. But Ian Paisley also knew that looking backwards is not enough. He realised, albeit latterly, that looking forward in relationship is vital...and moreover, despite his huge gift for public speaking (!), that action is also required. I must just tell you a story about him which illustrates his understanding of the need for practical action to follow rhetoric...He was preaching in his church in his inimitable style...‘There will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth!’ he boomed. A little old lady in the congregation meekly put up her hand and said, ‘But I haven’t got any teeth’. Paisley thundered, ‘Teeth will be provided!’

Today, as well as being Holy Cross day, is also Steve Biko Day in South Africa. And so I want to finish with a story about Steve Biko and his mother Alice. Steve Biko was a well known anti apartheid leader and in 1977 was brutally murdered while being held by the South African police. Steve and his mother Alice were talking shortly before his death, and she was telling him how much she worried about him - she couldn’t sleep at night until he was home for fear of him having been arrested and put in gaol. He replied by reminding her that Jesus had come to redeem his people and set them free.

“Are you Jesus?” she had asked impatiently. Steve had gently answered her,

“No, I’m not. But I have the same job to do.”

And so do we. Amen.