Jesus said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?”

These are words that could strike a chord with almost anyone, anywhere, facing any combination of complex circumstances. Many of our lives are full of fears – sometimes on the surface, sometimes quite hidden, even from our conscious selves … the ‘what if’s’ or ‘what if not’s’ that peep out from under the bed at night, or from around hidden corners, alarming us and bringing anxiety in their wake. They often isolate us, too – because so often we feel foolish, or unable for other reasons to admit them to others, so their disabling effect is magnified.

Who here has not been confronted with fear, not knowing what to do next? Presumably the disciples were in precisely this position – in fact John, in his, parallel, gospel account of this first Sunday evening, records the disciples as ‘having locked the door, for fear of the Jews’. What were they to do? How were they to be? What was going on, and what were their responsibilities?

As human beings we have a terrible tendency to leap to simplistic binary analysis: either this, or that, is the solution. And we can bring this into the world of faith: either trust in God, or trust in yourselves. I was leading our Litany of Reconciliation in the Nave yesterday lunchtime, reading these words: forgive us the pride which leads us to trust in ourselves rather than in God. But it’s really not an either/or. When facing our fears, do we rush around madly, seeking within ourselves the solution? Or do we avoid all action, preferring to rely entirely upon God and ‘not get in the way’ of what he might do? Or do we, not really believing that either of these courses of action is to be relied upon, sink into a pit of paralysed despair?

The disciples were catching up fast with something that they couldn’t grasp or comprehend until it was a physical reality in front of them. Jesus had spoken of resurrection – but they couldn’t believe it. Now he was standing in front of them – but still, clearly, either hard to recognize or hard to accept: why did he say to them, “Look at my hands and my feet – see that it is I myself”? He had to show that this was real – it meant that they had to accept the awful thing that had just happened, admit the terrible truth - but at the same time learn an openness to an unimagined future. Perhaps he looked quite different – and the nail holes were the one thing that showed who he was – a powerful image for the defining truth of Jesus, our crucified King – or perhaps it was more to show that the person in front of them was not a ‘flashback’ to his pre-crucifixion life. No – this Jesus has been, we could say ‘to hell and back’ – and so he was now truly the Saviour, not just a wonderful teacher.

This is a person who can embrace our fears – not a daydream, but a real flesh and blood savior, walking in history, rooted in reality. So we are invited to believe in him. But the account does not end there, of course: the little extract ends with the disciples being given a task. They are invited to believe in themselves. They have a part to play in the unfolding story, which has just taken such a dramatic new turn. Their fears are shattered by the appearance of Jesus, and their imprisonment behind the closed doors of their fear is ended, and they are free – and not just free, but required – to continue their work for the Kingdom of God.

The breaking down of fear comes through accepting the reality of what we fear, and the reality of what God has done, and then living in the light of that – living out our lives in service and partnership with God.

I’ve been away rather a lot lately, as you may have noticed – I feel a little embarrassed about that, but a whole cluster of things have all coincided, and I am fortunate in having some excellent colleagues. Some has been for
Deans’ leadership training – it has been controversial. Is the church a business, open to business techniques and practices? Or is it something else, the Body of Christ, where management techniques are quite out of place? Do we trust in ourselves, and the wisdom of the world – or do we trust in God, and the wisdom of the cross and the resurrection? This has actually become quite a heated debate – although it may seem foolish – but it’s very pertinent to us here, as we look ahead to the Annual Meeting this lunch time. Not all of the cathedral community members will be able to stay for that, so I would like to say just a little more. I know that many of you here this morning will be visitors, for whom this may seem a long way from your own concerns – but do please bear with us, and hold us in your prayers!

The words with which I began, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” are never far from the mind of a Dean. Being charged with the leadership of a cathedral is a wonderful, marvelous thing, full of wonder and privilege – but it does have its down side … as so often, the flip side of privilege is, of course, responsibility. The Cathedral archives team (who are wonderful, by the way) were kind enough to pass me a quote from one of my predecessors, which begins like this: “There is one matter about which I must take the Cathedral congregation into my confidence. Some of you know, but I think they are comparatively few, what a strain it is, sometimes almost an unbearable one, to find sufficient money to maintain the Cathedral and its services.” The quote continues to thank loyal members from the community who continued to support what was then known as the Duplex scheme – and to appeal for new ones. The quote is taken from the Coventry Cathedral Magazine dated December 1931!

The Church of England has become very aware of the challenges of maintaining both buildings and ministries which seek to be opening and inclusive, offering hospitality to those of all faiths and none, reaching out with open arms – in our case, across the world. That’s why it funded the quality leadership and management training, which I was able to share in in the week before Holy Week. And last week, at our Annual Dean’s three day conference, we were also addressed on the subject of leadership – most memorably by Lord Wilson, former Cabinet Secretary. He observed that it was strange to be talking to us, as Deans, about Leadership when in fact we were all followers – followers of Christ, who is our true leader.

This of course gets it exactly right – but Jesus (like all the best leaders) does not expect to do all the work himself. All of us have a part to play – some of us several parts, rather like an orchestra where some of the places aren’t yet filled. Earlier this year I had occasion to thank our volunteers, who may sometimes feel like hamsters keeping a huge wheel turning – I want to repeat that, and also encourage new recruits. I was most encouraged to hear one of our longest serving volunteers describe herself the following day as a ‘very happy hamster’, which was itself hugely encouraging. There are lots of ways to play a part in the life of the cathedral – there are 31 sections in the community report on congregational activity, but we could have added more, especially in work that offers dedicated support to the reconciliation ministry, our particular vocation. We also need to see our core support through stewardship rise again – and those who come to the annual meeting or who have read the report will have seen how – despite still being most encouraging in comparison to many cathedrals – our stewardship has slipped back again in the last year. We have been able to get a grip on our finances, but we’re not yet at the top of the hill. We have an amazing staff team in place, but there’s a lot to do, and we still don’t have either the capacity or the resources to fulfill all that I believe God is calling us to – and so he challenges us all to play our part.

I’d love to say more about the Reconciliation ministry in particular here, but we really don’t have time – it is, I think, the most exciting thing about the part God is calling us to play in the world today. But for now, I want simply to draw us back to the passage with which we started ….

As Jesus meets his disciples, now become apostles, on the day of resurrection, he has a double challenge: believe in me … and believe in yourselves. You have a task, under my leadership, he says – I won’t abandon you in it, I will give you the Holy Spirit to guide and equip you … hand in hand in hand.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.