The last time I was here was a cold and wet February day, earlier this year. I was walking, and speaking, as part of the Coexist ‘Pilgrimage of Peace’ - people of faith walk as people of peace. Walking alongside friends who were Muslim, Christian and Jewish, we had walked from the Central Mosque by Regents Park, by way of the Synagogue on Great Portland Street and passed here en route to the Houses of Parliament, and then to St. Thomas Hospital just across the Thames. In the three centres of worship we paused for a brief reflection and some prayers, focussing on the resources religious faith offers to those who want to work for peace. We were received by the Speaker of the House of Commons. Initially, we had hoped to give blood together as a symbol of our common humanity, but Health and Safety prevented us! In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, we wanted to show a better way to the world. Today, the challenges to work together remain vivid and vital, in the light of the refugee crisis.

This week our minds are full of the images of refugees, and in particular of the young boy face down on a beach in Turkey. Aylan Kurdi, 3 years old, dressed in his red tee shirt, blue shorts and trainers, lies in the surf, dead on the shore. His brother Ghalib and mother Rehan are also dead. Their father, Abdullah, is still alive. They had fled the fighting in Syria, lived in Turkey for 3 years and were trying to make their way to Canada to join Abdullah’s sister, Tina Kurdi.

The images in the newspapers and circulated on the internet have helped us find a connection with the human face of the refugee crisis. What was just numbers - even numbers like 70 bodies found in a lorry in Austria - was just too remote. Now, there is a human face. For me, it’s the photograph of Aylan and Galip in a family photo. Aylan is fiddling with his ear with his right hand, and has a yellow zip top on. He looks bright, and smiling, if a little unsure besides his elder brother.

All of a sudden, we have discovered our common humanity. For months - years - the refugees seeking entry to “our” space have been “them”. Now, suddenly, many of have realised that this is about “us” - the human family, in crisis. Issues of blame are no longer sufficient to barricade and protect us from responsibility. This is our problem: we are one human family, and our children are lying dead on a beach. We have to do something.

How does God speak to us, today, and guide us to respond? What resonances do we find in scripture? Well, extraordinarily, the first reading today also includes a description of bodies lying dead on the shore line, following a dramatic escape from persecution across the sea. But in this story, one of the best known stories of deliverance in the Jewish Christian tradition, it is not the refugees, but the persecutors, who are drowned, and whose bodies are discovered in the morning lying on the beach. But does it really matter whose bodies are on the shore? Isn’t it time we moved on from an ‘us’ and ‘them’ to hope and work and pray for a future for all of humanity?

My home and work is in Coventry, in the Midlands, about a hundred miles to the north of here. Our history has been defined, like many cities, by a number of key events - the ride of Lady Godiva, in the eleventh century; the sending to Coventry of the Royalist troops in the seventeenth century; and the Coventry blitz almost exactly 75 years ago. Perhaps you know the story?

In a terrible, intense air raid bombers pounded the city for over eleven hours, reducing much of the city centre and the beautiful medieval cathedral to rubble. But the walls still stood, and the next morning, my predecessor Provost Dick Howard wrote the words, Father Forgive, perhaps in soot, in the apse of the ruined and smoking cathedral. Why Forgive at all? he was challenged ... and if so, why not ‘Forgive them’? Because we are all bound together in this tragic story of destruction, he explained. And so the hope for the future must be one not just for ‘us’ - that ‘they’ will never be able to do this to ‘us’ again: but that we are all ‘us’. We pray, he said, for a gentler, a kinder, a more Christ-child like kind of world which discovers the reconciliation which has been nailed into the heart of the world in the
cross; in which the family of humanity cares for one another as family, by the mercy and grace of God. We banish the word ‘them’ from our vocabulary. We are one in this.

Last time I was here I recounted an experience which had happened to me only a few days earlier. I had just been driving through Bristol on a Friday afternoon. The traffic was heavy, and there was congestion around the roundabout in the city centre when we heard the siren and saw the reflection of the blue flashing lights in the shop and office windows. And something wonderful happened. The order of the queues at the traffic lights broke down into a beautiful and glorious muddle as cars pulled to left and right to make way for the ambulance. Humanity at its best – community sprang, briefly, into existence as men and women, stressed and tired on an early Friday evening, came together as one to enable the life-saving vehicle to make its way through.

For some reason, it brought tears to my eyes. It’s such a beautiful moment, that blue flashing light moment, when I think, ‘It’s not all bad ... we’re not all bad.’ It comes and goes in a moment, and the traffic starts again, people start cutting each other up and blocking the lanes again, the irritable horns start again. But what’s real, what’s true – the moment when we all fight each other, or the moment when we all work together?

The Lord’s Prayer, contained on the New Testament reading, is a prayer for humanity - a family prayer for us to be able to work out our differences, and to build a kingdom with space for all to flourish. A prayer where forgiveness is at the heart of our life - and so, therefore, is hope.

We are called to rediscover our true humanity in these days of crisis for our continent, our world - by the Grace of God, who reconciles all people to himself, to allow space in our hearts and our lives for our suffering brothers and sisters. To pray the prayer of Jesus as a prayer for all, and to allow the prayer to direct our won hearts and our minds to those shores in Turkey and Greece, to those stations and road sides across Europe where our brothers and sisters, our children, struggle towards a life of safety.

We finish with this prayer from colleagues at Leicester Cathedral:

Heavenly Father,
you are the source of all goodness, generosity and love.
We thank you for opening the hearts of many to those who are fleeing for their lives.
Help us now to open our arms in welcome, and reach out our hands in support.
That the desperate may find new hope, and lives torn apart be restored.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, who fled persecution at His birth and at his last triumphed over death.
Amen.