“How awesome is this place; this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven.”

How often have you heard these words on this day, those of you whose years have been marked by coming into this extraordinary building? I hope that their excitement has never been dulled, nor their edge lost. This is an awesome place; this is the house of God, the gate of heaven. Fresh from my experience of abseiling down the outside of the building in October last year, I am more aware than ever of the sheer scale of this place – and the ladder stretching to heaven, in Jacob’s dream, puts me in mind of the ladders up each side of the tapestry … stretching from the face of Christ down to the altar in the Lady Chapel where he makes himself known in bread and wine, as we celebrate communion in there on Monday mornings.

This is the house of God, the gate of heaven for those seeking forgiveness and a new start in their lives, or the life of their communities and nations. It is the gate of heaven for those on their own pilgrimage of faith and love, the place where God can be found. It is the gate of heaven for this Diocese and City of Coventry: a place to come in times of joy and sorrow, for meeting one another and meeting God. It’s a place for memory, and a place for hope. In recent months I’ve found myself talking about Honesty, Healing and Hope as I reflect on the passage from the ruins of the old cathedral, through the porch and into the new, and up to the foot of the tapestry. We look back, around us, and ahead. These views are reflected in the three priorities of the Community of the Cross of Nails:

- Healing the Wounds of History
- Learning to Live with Difference and celebrate Diversity
- Building a Culture of Peace

Some of you have come today bearing on your hearts those whose names are recorded on our Millennium Screen, in the beautiful Chapel of Reconciliation on the way down the stairs – a suitable transitional location. (Did I just rename that Chapel – I think perhaps I did!) We are grateful for the support of those who have had names recorded there, and share with them in honouring the life or memory of those named. They are, in their own, way, part of the company of angels who accompany us in our pilgrimage today.

As I have been thinking towards today, I have found myself remembering other anniversaries, and another church dedicated to St. Michael and All Angels. On June 24th of this year, I found myself in the Lady Chapel here for a Wednesday Morning Prayer. Almost without noticing, I had stumbled into a triple anniversary: the fifteenth anniversary of my wedding with Ricarda, the thirtieth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, and the Festival for my Patron Saint, John the Baptist. There is something about such days when we recall God’s faithfulness through the changes and chances of our lives. They are humbling moments. (I’ll say more about this date at the Friends’ AGM.)

Today, the festival of St. Michael and All Angels’, as some of you know, is another day for me which speaks quite personally of God’s abiding presence. I have been blessed to be part of three church families under this dedication, or a part of it. Here, of course, is the Church of St. Michael. But some thirty five years ago, I was for a year part of the church of All Angels’ in New York City – at the tender age of twenty one, spreading my wings in public ministry and stepping out into God’s calling on my life. I revisited the church back in June, and met again the Rector with whom I had worked – Carol Anderson, one of the very first women priests in the Episcopal Church of the United States. And both before and after that, I was part of St Michael and All Angels’ Bramcote, on the edge of Nottingham. That funny little church – I think I’ve told you about it before – is the church where the gospel first came alive to me when I was sixteen, and attracted as much by the blond hair of another member of the youth group as the promises of eternal life; it’s the church where I made my Confirmation of faith, where I preached my first sermon, where I stood for the
funeral of my first wife, and stood again to be married to Ricarda. It’s the church where I expect, one day, I hope not too soon, to join again with that church family to give thanks for the lives of each of my parents.

These church buildings mark our years, and hold them within the reconciling love of God. This cathedral building has the privilege of holding the lives not just of those who gather here week by week, but also those who count themselves part of our family, across the diocese, across the nation, and across the world ... not just those who are part of the 180 strong network of communities of the cross of nails, but so many more who have been touched by God’s reconciling love through this building and the ministry which has shaped, and is shaped by, it.

Today we celebrate a baptism as part of our service – so as we mark memories, we also mark beginnings – what a wonderful day to be baptised, in this place. The Feast of Michaelmas! It’s perfect ... and I hope you will come back year by year (better still, week by week) into this place which is now the home of your Christian family.

This is the gate of heaven. But that doesn’t mean it’s an easy place. If we were to have had all our readings today, we would have heard also scriptures that tell a vision of war in heaven – a war which mirrors the wars on earth. These are troubling times in which we live, where the cathedral’s words of reconciliation can feel both desperately necessary but also hopelessly weak. At the end of the service we will go and stand outside the cathedral below the extraordinary statue of St. Michael standing over the figure of Satan: some see simple subjection, whilst others see a plea for mercy in Satan’s expression, which may or may not be met in the triumphant and beautiful figure of the angel. Our words will be thrown out in to the world – words which speak of the ultimate victory of God over evil.

But our words will not go out alone – because although this is the gate of heaven, it is the gate of heaven not because of this building, but because of Jesus. The gate of heaven is not a building, no matter how marvellous or majestic. The gate of heaven is now Jesus Christ: this is the message of the reading from John’s gospel. The ladder to heaven, with angels going up and down upon it (and angels signify the presence and saving purpose of God) now has its foot on Jesus himself. Wherever Jesus is found, there is the gate of heaven. And Jesus is found everywhere, can be met anywhere.

So, we gather on this awesome feast to celebrate God’s faithfulness to his people here, and the faithfulness of those who have supported and safeguarded this ministry – especially those who have placed names on the Millennium Screen. God speaks to Jacob, as he speaks to us, saying: “I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.” So our calling is to stay with him – we already know that he will stay with us. He is leading us on a journey, a journey of reconciliation, a great pilgrimage like a conga snaking through the world. Ultimately we believe that all will join, but for now our task is to witness faithfully, to play our part in reaching out to others, to be a reconciled and reconciling people, making the love of God known in a broken and hurting world. It’s a tough calling, but it’s worth it, and we’re not on our own. We’re surrounded by angels.

We give thanks for some of those angels now, as we acknowledge the support and memories of those who have placed names on the Millennium Screen – and we especially welcome those who have joined us today. I invite you to join me in prayerful thanks for all those who have shared in the journey of this cathedral, and for those who through their commitment and generosity will enable that journey to continue, as we pray:

Lord our God, we thank you for this Cathedral Church of Coventry. We thank you for holding our lives here, and our hearts here. We thank you for all that this cathedral has brought through the ministry of reconciliation into the life of the world, and we ask for the resources to continue that work. And we thank you now for those whose names, or the names of those whom they love, are inscribed upon our Millennium Screen. We bless and thank you for them, and we pray that they may know your peace surrounding and leading them, wherever they may be. We offer you ourselves on this patronal festival to take and use us, to bring glory to your name, and for the building of your Kingdom of peace and reconciliation. We ask this through the power of the Spirit, in fellowship with St. Michael and all the Angels, and in the mighty name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.