It’s a great pleasure to welcome you to the Cathedral for this service to mark the beginning of the Legal Year. This is, in a small way, an historic occasion - as we proclaim the unity of City and County through the ministry of the Cathedral and Diocese, which bridges the Civil boundaries, as perhaps it should. The Warwickshire Legal Service will return, we expect, to St. Mary’s next year - but it’s good to enjoy this unique opportunity to gather here today.

It’s also a personal pleasure, not just because of the joy of accompanying Janet through her year as High Sherriff, but also because it allows me the chance to bring together two roads from my own history. Like many clergy, it seems, I had originally expected to pursue a career in the law. But in the midst of my first degree, in Law, I found myself coaxed onto a different path. After completing that first degree, I went to spend a year exploring and testing out Church Ministry in New York City, then returned to study Theology and be ordained. Of course, the two professions – the church and the law – are not so dissimilar as might at first be thought. Both are about helping people make sense of life, of choosing the right path, about enabling men and women negotiate the trials and tribulations of daily experience, especially as they fall foul of one another or the wider society. Sometimes, it seems a miracle to me that it all – our society, community – hangs together and doesn’t simply disintegrate into anarchy. Sometimes it does break down to a greater or lesser extent, and between us – in both church and law – we have a role in restoring people to the right path, to right relationships, to community.

A society could not function, on a sustainable basis, without the Rule of Law. Law enables us to reasonably predict what is expected of us, and what we can expect of others. It puts sanctions in place to reinforce those expectations, and when all is working well it can, in a sense, be forgotten, or at least left in the background. Many people feel rather the same about religion – it is something which is probably worthwhile, but it can be safely ignored unless urgent need arises. At its worst, it can sometimes appear positively dangerous – but, like oppressive laws, this is best put down more to culture and tribalism than to a problem with religion as such.

So what are we doing here, in this service? Here, we celebrate the presence and value of the Law in the centre of our society, and we do that in the context of a religious service? For this day only, we shine a light on both law and faith, in the context of this rather grand celebration.

We do so, because it is a way of giving thanks for those who serve us in the legal professions – and gives an opportunity to pray for them ... for you – and to reflect on what we are doing as we serve the law. Our readings today offer one approach to that, and (if you were listening attentively) you will have heard passages which suggest that at the heart of the law is actually love. That’s probably not the common perception – a court room is about as far from a chapel of love as you can imagine. Yet here in the readings the message is clear: the conclusion of all our laws is what is sometimes called the law of love, to “love your neighbor as yourself, for love is the fulfilling of the law”.

Love may sound a rather nebulous measure for a robust legal system? Not necessarily so: love is much more than simple emotion. It is a commitment of life towards the good of another. It is as much action as words, as much head as heart. Rather like Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady, if love becomes too misty eyed we need to respond: don’t speak of love, show me. In our first reading from the rather fearsome Old
Testament book of Leviticus, the instruction moves from practical instruction addressed directly to those of you here: do not administer justice with partiality. It continues to legislate against slander, but soon presses below the surface to the underlying motive: do not hate, but love your neighbor. The instruction to love does not offer an escape from practical action – it takes it to a whole other level.

It is, in the end, the motive which will direct and determine the action. And if all that we do in the service of the law is in the service of love, it will direct the outcome of our efforts, for good.

We have our own experience of this here in the cathedral, in our work of reconciliation. Our history makes no pretense about the reality of broken relationship – and of the violent destruction which ensues. We preserve the honest truth of that diagnosis of the human condition in the ruins of the old cathedral, through which we walked on the way to this service. But we don’t see it as the end. A simple response of justice to that destruction would not have led Provost Howard to write the words Father Forgive on the walls of the ruins. Instead, without denying the evil that had taken place, he called the cathedral and the city to a higher goal – the law of love. Echoing the words of Leviticus, he spoke to the nation in the Christmas Day broadcast in 1940 pleading with them, ‘hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge from your hearts.’

Provost Howard’s courageous words opened the minds and hearts of those around the globe to the possibility of building what he described as a, ‘kinder, more gentle, a more Christ-child like sort of world’. His words still resonate today, and have inspired many to commit to a different way of resolving disputes, to look for reconciliation rather than revenge – to build a future with hope for all.

In the practice of the law I know that it will not always be so apparently easy to enable an outcome of reconciliation, of good for all. This is a broken world. It’s not perfect, and we find ourselves struggling with that. Provost Howard knew that, and that’s why the Cross of Nails – a symbol of human brokenness – sits at the heart of our Cathedral life. It’s a symbol of Christ’s enduring presence with us even in the midst of the worst destruction that the world can bear, that human beings can experience. But as soon as we acknowledge Christ’s presence in any situation, we know it’s not the end – because his presence brings a breath of heaven, a promise of resurrection, the hope of future. That future beyond destruction is embodied here in this glorious new cathedral – consecrated over 20 years after the fire which destroyed the old St. Michael’s. And so we have around us here Honesty, Hope – and Healing, as people from across the world, and across what were enemy lines, are brought back together to rebuild a future.

All that we do here, in the end, is in the service of love. Love is not a soft option: it was the love of God for his world that led him to reach out afresh to us in Jesus Christ. It is love which leads us to make the greatest sacrifices for the good of others. And it is love that we draw on and serve, I believe, in the practice of the law.

It is clear from both our readings that the authors of the Bible believe that Law, ultimately, springs from God. It is God who requires us to act justly towards one another, and to offer mercy, and another chance, to those who fail. One of the features of God’s commandments to his people, however, is never to make a commandment, never to lay down a law, without helping us to fulfill it – whether by the teaching of his written word which helps us know what to do, or the inspiration of his Spirit which helps us see things as he sees them, which strengthens our hearts and minds, or by those with whom he gives us to work.

I have to tell you, it’s hard work running a cathedral. I couldn’t do it without the inspiration and strengthening of God day by day. No matter how worthwhile, the challenges are considerable. The same, the very same, is true for you. What you do – as is true for us, I believe – holds society together. God is there to strengthen and equip you in that work day by day, and I pray that you will know his presence and power. And what he will do is to strengthen and direct you in the service of love, because love really is the fulfilling of the law.