Coventry stands at the heart of God’s dealings with the world. It stands as evidence of the destruction humanity brings upon itself through violence and conflict, and at the same time it stands for the presence of God in the midst of that suffering, bringing the promise of hope and new life. It stands, offering space for hope – space for people to gather, as we do this evening, and space to open the imagination for the mind and the heart to conceive of a different way of living our lives together.

Here in Coventry, we have lived out seventy five years of the words of Provost Howard just six weeks after the destruction of the cathedral, when in the BBC’s Christmas Broadcast in 1940 he called the nation, and those standing with us, to follow what we ourselves had found the courage to do: What we want to tell the world is this: that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge... We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler, a more Christ Child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife.

I was always going to start my address this evening with these words, but in the wake of the terrible events on Friday evening in Paris, they are more pertinent than ever. Of course we want to hit back after we have been attacked. Of course we want to take revenge. Of course we are tempted, in the words of President Hollande, to be ‘pitiless’ in our response. But here in Coventry we have learned a different narrative: the words ‘Father Forgive’, written on the wall of the ruined cathedral, call us to stand shoulder to shoulder with all humanity – without exception – to ask God to forgive us and our enemies, to ask him, plead with him, to rebuild a common humanity.

The glorious new cathedral stands as testimony to that hope. Splendid, and beautiful, it beckons us in from the devastation of the ruins, into a vision of light, and hope, focussed upon the great tapestry of Christ. We gather tonight as members, and representatives, of many faith traditions – but all of us will own the hope that faith offers, of a God who draws us into healed relationships with God and one another ... the hope of a redeemed human family.

I want to talk for a moment about the call through the prophet Micah in the Hebrew scriptures to walk as a holy people – a people who are obedient to God to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with one another, and the Lord our God. These were words which struck home to me right around the time that I was hoping to come to Coventry to take up the post here as Dean: I had been shortlisted for interview, but I was spending a few weeks in Israel Palestine. I found myself on a street in the middle of Hebron, Shehada Street. It is a street which has been cleared of its shops and its inhabitants, and which is banned to local Palestinians. Instead, it is home to a small number of Jewish settlers, guarded by checkpoints, and patrolled by Israeli military. I describe this not to make a political point, but to offer it as an example of the way that mutual fear can never pave the way forward for peace. It is street which crackles with fear, and tension. Yet twice a day it does receive Palestinian women and children, who use a small section as part of their route to school – and so just for a short time, Palestinian Arabs, Jewish settlers, and Israeli soldiers walk the same tarmac and concrete. That small coincidence of time and place offers a chink of light for peace: how would it be, I wondered if those groups were able to follow the call of the prophet Micah? To do justice means listening to the truth of the other: really listen, not pre-judge. How would it be for the soldiers, and settlers, to hear from the Palestinians how it had been to be thrown out of homes and livelihoods, to live in fear of the occupying forces? How would it be for the Palestinians to hear from the soldiers – many of them young conscripts – how it was for them to live in fear from the teeming city around them, from the surrounding countries? And could they begin to ‘love mercy’? The word in Hebrew is ‘hesed’ – loving kindness. It’s a wonderful word, which has its roots in that most fundamental of religious concepts – the covenant. It’s about a commitment to relationship which transcends all other claims and rights ... and means looking one another in the eye. These two things – to
listen – to the truth of the past, and hear the call for justice; to look into the relationship of the present, and be ready to build relationship ...; and then to walk forward. To begin to build a future together.

I learned just the other day from some new Iranian friends that Shehada, in Arabic, means ‘witness’. And that street witnesses, just like Coventry, to the brokenness of the world, and the deep failures of our ways of trying to fix that brokenness. But it also holds the seeds of hope. Here in Coventry we have managed to inspire, though our response to brokenness, a world which desperately needs to hear what we have found to be true. Warsan Shire has a poem in which she writes:

“Later that night I held an atlas in my lap and ran my fingers across the whole world and whispered, where does it hurt? It answered, ‘everywhere, everywhere, everywhere.’”

We have found ways of living out the call of the prophet Micah: that religion, at its heart, does not consist in elaborate rituals – 100’s of rams, rivers of oil, but in living for the world which God wants. To do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God – and therefore with one another. To listen to truth, to commit to relationship, to work together for a better future. We put it in this way in the three fold priorities of the Community of the Cross of Nails:

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

Provost Howard was inspired by his Christian faith to reach out to God, to his neighbours in the cathedral, and to his enemies – to plead for a new start. He put himself in the place of reconciliation – not an easy place, I’m sure, and I know he received fierce criticism. But his knowledge of gospel texts like the one read tonight from Matthew will also have prepared him for that: those who have a heart for peace, and reconciliation, will discover God’s blessing, but they will also know human persecution. We in Coventry have a heart for peace, and a calling to reconciliation: that will not always be easy. We have been engaged in this work for 75 years here in the cathedral – Making Space for Hope, as the leaflets about our work say – and it’s not easy. It’s costly, in more ways than one, but we are on to something which the world desperately needs to know. The way to a common future can never, ultimately, be through violence. It can only be through understanding, learning what lies behind the actions of the other ... discovering that, like it or not, we are part of one human family. We do that here in the Cathedral through the grace of God: but each of us needs to find our own resources for working for a shared future, which will sustain us for the long road ahead.

I feel as though I would like to play a track from the Hollies now ...!

This is an amazing city, with an extraordinary cathedral - my heart was full as I woke up this morning, with the memory of Provost Howard walking into the ruins – a new world was beginning, out of ruin, and therefore we have an authentic word from this city to the world.

Let’s be proud of what we have, here – let’s be proud of Coventry – let’s be proud of Christ and the difference he makes – or find our own root for that hope. We stand together tonight ... shoulder to shoulder, in a place of hope for the future.