What a year it’s been. Events in Paris have framed it – with the Charlie Hebdo attacks in February, to the terrible events in November. Earlier in the year we were all holding the image of Aylan Kurdi in our minds – the little boy drowned off a beach in Turkey. He helped us make a personal connection with the refugees and their plight – Warsan Shire’s powerful poem ‘No one leaves home’ was a great help here, too. And just a week ago were back in Paris, for the Climate Summit, facing a different sort of threat – but also being asked to find a way of working together to find a world-wide solution.

The truth is, that solutions to the world’s problems only work, if they work for everybody. Too many of the ‘answers’ are answers only for the select few, for those who are ‘in’. Paulo Freire, the great educationalist, helped us understand that education will only really be effective if it benefits everyone – so that the whole society moves forward. Pedagogy of the oppressed: “Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.”

“But I can’t work with them”, is a phrase which is repeated the world over. We are all subject to it – even here is this cathedral, hard to believe though it can be, we have our own little groups .... But every time we talk about ‘them’ – or even about ‘us’ – we are creating divisions which prevent us creating real community, real relationship, real partnership, and we undermine everything that this service tonight is about.

This, as we know, is the message which Coventry seeks to share with the world. I have already lost count of the number of times I have spoken of the significance of the ‘Father Forgive’ inscription in the Ruins of the old cathedral. So I was really appalled to find the heavily marketed new book on the Coventry Blitz by Frederick Taylor, which appears to be meticulously researched, says the inscription is ‘Father Forgive Them’.

Jesus was born to make everyone, ‘us’. He sits both at the centre of a community, and all around its edges – holding everyone together, catching up the waifs and strays. Jesus came to form a new community – a new community where no-one should feel excluded, no-one feel they don’t belong, no-one should feel they are just not noticed. This can sound so clichéd, because it’s so familiar – but it really is extraordinary. It’s extraordinary, because Jesus is not some wishy washy preacher with no friends, a sort of divine Billy no-mates, who’ll spend time with you because he doesn’t have anyone else. Jesus is the King of Heaven, the Lord of Lords, the one who formed the earth, who saw it all begin, and will be there at the end of the story. He’s the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Hope of the Nations. He’s the one who speaks wisdom into all generations, who gave his life for others, who spoke with Kings and beggars, who healed the sick, who raised the dead. He’s the one who was born in poverty and put down in an animal feeding trough, because there wasn’t a cradle. He’s the one who’s story has been told so often, we almost can’t bear to hear it again.

Jesus offers hope – a way forward, beyond the petty and not so petty wars we find ourselves caught up in. He’s the one who, as Rowan Williams says, makes the whole business of self-justification irrelevant, because he has justified us all: we are accepted, we are through to the next round, we are on our way to heaven. And, in the world of the gospel, that is only good news because it is good news for everyone. No-one is excluded.
Not even you. Not even them.

This cathedral community – and all Christian communities – is a place where we begin to work out what that means. I am not pretending, not even for a minute, that it’s easy. Not even at Christmas, when no sooner is one thing finished in this extraordinary building than it’s time to get ready for something else. When Roy Wood and Wizard sang, ‘I wish it could be Christmas every day’, it’s just possible that some Cathedral communities might quietly dissent. But it’s just at this sort of time that we also catch a glimpse of the wonder that makes it all worthwhile: Jesus, the son of God, born in our midst. The greatest gift ever given.

Now I know that many of you who come to catch a glimpse of that glory, that wonder, do so as part of a Christmas tradition that perhaps doesn’t touch the rest of the year. I know that many others might come at Christmas and think on and off about coming along some other time. And others come more or less often through the year. I want to challenge you this year – how about playing your part in working out a new sort of living – one in which there is an all-encompassing ‘us’ … and an invitation in which no one feels excluded. In Coventry – and in this cathedral in particular, we have a duty to the world to show a different way of working out what community means: our story is known across the globe, but for it to have real bite and power today, it needs people of every generation to work out afresh how to live through our differences, and find the path of peace.

Will you be part of that? The challenge is for those who belong here already as well as those who do not. In the coming weeks we will be having newcomers’ events to help you know what this cathedral stands for, and how you can be part of it. If you’re interested in that, fill in one of the cards at the back or speak to one of the stewards.

There’s a phrase that says something along the lines of ... the rest of your life begins ... now! And ... now! And ... now!

Make it count for something – be a part of something extraordinary. For the sake of the future. For the sake of the world. For the sake of God. For the sake of yourselves.

Amen.