May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable your sight O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to thank the Dean for his invitation to preach this morning and indeed for going to Central Hall to share with the people there. I'm grateful to the Canon Precentor and to all of you for your warm welcome to the Cathedral today. It is good to be with you and to rejoice in our shared faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

We gather at the beginning of the week of prayer for Christian Unity, now well established among Christians of many traditions. We take to it with varying degrees of enthusiasm as we organise shared services, pulpit exchanges, conversations and so on. But what unity do we think we are praying for? In these days, that unity can be needed as much within our denominations as between them and equally sometimes we might feel ourselves more united across denominational lines than we are with sisters or brothers who claim the same name.

I preach in an Anglican Cathedral this morning with not a little trepidation. I'm sure you've been aware of the gathering of the primates of the Anglican Communion in Canterbury this week and you've probably heard various of the media reports of their conversations and decisions. It seems ironic that this morning's lectionary texts both speak of marriage, but more of that later. What does it mean to pray for unity and what would the unity we pray for look like? Finding how to express the unity of the Anglican Communion has been a challenge for Archbishops of Canterbury for a number of years now and Archbishop Justin, like other leaders within our churches, certainly needs our prayers.

The gathering of the primates decided that because of the Episcopal Church's decision to accept same-sex marriage, then their participation in the life of the Anglican Communion should be restricted in certain ways. Some commentators have summarised it by saying they will have voice but not vote for the next three years. Archbishop Justin has said that this should not be seen as sanctions against the Episcopal Church but rather as the consequences of their own actions.

As Christians we cannot have conversations like this in isolation. The world is watching and listening; our own people are watching and listening. For LGBTI Christians these conversations are not primarily about church rules or discipline, they are firstly about our lives and relationships, about who we are at the deepest level. As someone who might one day want to be married to my partner who is of the same sex the question can never be simply academic. With the Dean and I'm sure the wider cathedral community, my greatest concern is for those Anglican and other LGBTI people who are left feeling rebuffed and unwanted and that there is no place or welcome for them in the church. We are sisters and brothers in Christ, and we belong together. Even as someone who is a minister and has heard it all before, each time you something like this happens, you ask yourself the question of why you are where you are. Why as an LGBTI person do I still want to be part of this community we call church?

In her sermon last week, the Canon Pastor reflected on the fact that God calls us by name and we belong to God. Each and every one of us across boundaries of gender, race, sexuality, denomination and so on. As we pray for Christian Unity, we must realise again that in Christ all barriers are broken down and that there is no longer male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free because we are all one. We belong to God, we are known by God and called by name.
A name isn’t just a handy way of knowing who we’re talking about. A name connects deeply to our sense of identity. In many cases our names are chosen for specific reasons. You may have a name that recognises one of your forebears or that says something of your history. Your name is usually given by your parents and says something of your relationship with them. People sometimes change their names; for all kinds of reasons. People may change their name on marriage, religious take a new name on being admitted to an Order, those who undergo gender reassignment take a new name, sometimes people just don't like the name they had before.

But we don’t just use ordinary names to refer to each other. We use other names too – other descriptors of individuals or groups, sometime more or less complimentary. The Methodists were originally called that pejoratively – they were thought overly methodical in their approach to Christianity – with a very disciplined approach to Bible study, prayer, attendance at the Eucharist, ministering to the poor and so on... this new and different group attracted attention and ridicule. And so our name arose and stuck. We’re not as disciplined now as we were then – perhaps it would be better if we were!

What as Christians do we call one another? How do we think of each other? Which names do we see first? The people of God that the prophet in Isaiah 62 was speaking to were receiving new names. These new names were not arbitrary but spoke deeply into the restoration of God’s city and the restoration of God’s people. No longer shall you be termed Forsaken and your land shall no more be termed Desolate. We might pause a moment and wonder by whom they had been called that? Perhaps as a people in exile they were more than used to being considered forsaken and of less value than others. Perhaps they themselves felt those names more appropriate like Naomi who named herself Mara (meaning bitter) for the Lord had dealt bitterly with her.

God’s restoration is expressed here in terms of marriage. They shall be called “My delight is in her” or Hephzibah – a name echoing the prosperity of former days. Their land shall be called Married. These images speak of the re-establishing of a deep and profound relationship between God and God’s people. As a young man marries a young woman – so shall your builder marry you. Your builder being God of course. But there is an issue of translation here – the reading of the Hebrew Masoretic text and indeed the Greek of the Septuagint is “your sons shall marry you.” As a young man marries a young woman so shall your sons marry you. A change of Hebrew vowels gives your builder. Whichever reading we take, the text speaks of the prosperity and renewal of the city – a rebuilt relationship with God and the loyalty of its offspring. The metaphor of marriage is used broadly not narrowly and gives us expansive image of the overflowing love of God. The words of the prophet paint a picture in which God’s people return to God’s blessings and God rejoices in them.

How do we hear those words as we pray for unity as Christian people today? What do those words say to us of our relationship with God and with one another? Where have we felt forsaken or where have we forsaken others?

For those of us in the LGBTI community, we have too often felt forsaken by the church. The situation has often felt desolate. It remains to be seen whether we can yet be called “My delight is in them” or even “Married”. Across the world Christians and LGBTI people alike suffer persecution and danger because of who they are. Whenever we lend support to injustice and oppression of any kind we lend support to that persecution and danger. As Martin Luther King, Jr, whose birthday fell on Friday said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” We know what it is to be forsaken, we know what desolation is – here of all places we know the desolation that violence brings and into the worst of it we speak the words, “Father forgive.”

We are just ordinary people and have just the ordinary things of life to work with. We can do so little in the face of a world of division – we can’t even sort out the church! Our prayers for unity, whether within our denominations or between them might seem like futile words. Yet we trust in a God who is greater than all of these things. We worship
a God in whom what was forsaken and desolate is made new and restored. We worship a God who from water in stone jars brings wine better than all that had gone before.

The arms of Jesus are wide open and welcome us to come together to his wedding feast. To come from near and far, to come whoever we are, to come for wine and milk without money and without price. Bishop Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church put it this way:

“Our commitment to be an inclusive church is not based on a social theory or capitulation to the ways of the culture, but on our belief that the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross are a sign of the very love of God reaching out to us all.”

If we are to find the unity of Christians and the Church, we will find it at that cross, in those arms and enveloped in that love.

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My delight is in her and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you.