It’s been quite a week again in Coventry Cathedral, and in the life of a Dean. I returned on Tuesday morning from two weeks in South Africa, travelling to visit our partners in the Community of the Cross of Nails. On Friday we hosted the celebration of the life of Jimmy Hill, with over 2000 people in the cathedral, and more outside, gathered for speeches, music, tributes - prayers. And to cap it all, today is Valentine’s Day – so many different things around which I could build a homily this evening.

In the midst of all this activity, what’s really important? Yesterday I drove down to Bristol to visit my granddaughter, Ellie Grace – the one whose picture crawling in the aisle of the Cathedral during our morning Eucharist reached over 100,000 people via Facebook. She wasn’t really very well, so we had a rather quiet time with her ... but there was something in that quiet time together which contrasted with all the rest of the busyness and drew us aside to something important. Turning away from the glitz and the glamour of international travel, of footballing celebrations in the Cathedral, of the gaudiness and commercialism of the Valentine’s Day offerings to a small house on the edge of a big city to spend time with family, was actually to find real treasure.

The season of Lent is really about discovering what’s important, and that often involves turning aside, and redressing priorities. Of course to do that can be painful, as we give up the addictions which distract us from the truth that lies at the heart of our lives – that’s why Lent can have a bad name, as a time for self denial and misery. But to free us from that which holds us back from real life, whilst painful, is ultimately about rediscovering true life, true freedom. Lent can sound like a season to turn away from life – whereas actually it’s a time to turn to life.

The people of Nineveh understood this well enough, when Jonah walked through their city – a journey, we are told, of three days. They understood that in their great city they had lost track of what it meant to truly live, and committed themselves to rediscovering life’s true heartbeat. God led them, through Jonah, back from death to life. Back, we might say, from the pride that had led them to trust in themselves and not in God, back to the God who was the true source of life and all that is good. But that was a humbling experience. We can imagine that the city was a great place, full of self importance, the envy of those who lived beyond its boundaries – or at least, that’s what it would have looked like on the outside. On the inside, the suffering of the poor in the back streets and the self doubt of the rich and powerful would have been all too real. Jonah, of course, was not too happy that God chose to save them as they turned back to him – he would rather they had been destroyed, been punished for their wanton behavior and self-centredness. But God is not like that – he is full of mercy and grace. He does, actually, want the best for us.

Jonah, it seems, might have had something in common with the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, fond of looking down on those around him from a great height. Many of us will know the story very well – and we will be used to the uncomfortable stab of recognition as we perceive within ourselves that self-righteous pride, which at best looks patronizingly down at those around us, asking for God to help them. Jonah walked through the city – perhaps his city, although more probably not – looking down on those around him, calling them to repentance from a position of self-righteousness.

As I re-read these two stories, my mind went again to the Litany, and it’s refrain of the text written into the wall of the Ruins of the old Cathedral: Father Forgive. The key missing word, of course, is ‘them’ – the words as written call us to take our place with those who need to ask for God’s forgiveness. Neither Jonah, nor the Pharisee, it seems to me, would have been ready to adopt such a simple admission of their own need.
But there’s the rub: to admit our need for forgiveness, to turn again to God, is turn again to life. To admit that we are falling short of God’s commands is to admit that we are missing out – missing out on the riches of a life lived in partnership with God and his new community, missing out on all that’s really worthwhile, missing out on love.

Lent is a time to turn aside from all that distracts us from true life, time to turn back to God, to the simplicity of a life lived in his love, of sharing God’s love with others. It’s a time to turn away from some pleasures – for sure – but in doing so, it’s a time to rediscover the heart of what life’s all about.

One of my delights in South Africa was to re-introduce a number of our partners to the Coventry Litany – and in so doing, to be reminded again myself of its simplicity, its comprehensiveness, and its great value in calling us back to the heart of a life lived with God. I would like to recommend its use as a daily discipline throughout Lent – a means God has given us here to find again for ourselves the joy of a life lived in the trust of God, not having to justify ourselves but rather admitting our need for forgiveness – and in that admission, to find ourselves once again transformed into God’s new community, a foretaste of heaven.