Jesus said to his disciples: “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into the harvest.”

Later in this service the bishop will pray a prayer for those ordained priest which includes these words:

“In union with their fellow servants in Christ, may they reconcile what is divided, heal what is wounded and restore what is lost.”

On June 24th we all woke up as members of a deeply divided nation. About 25% of the residents of Great Britain were either too cynical or disorganised to vote in the referendum. Of those who did vote, 51% voted to leave the European Union and 48% voted to remain. Whichever way we voted, what has been clearly revealed is a deeply divided country; divided between old and young, Scotland and England, Wales and Lambeth, graduates and non-graduates and more. The past weeks have been characterised by a good deal of disappointment, a fair amount of jingoism and much pain, and have left us facing an unknown and somewhat uncertain future. Much lies ahead in terms of sorting out the issues which were the subject of fierce and divisive campaigning, especially the presence of immigrants in our communities and the stability of our economy - not forgetting all the legislation and negotiation which will be needed over the next two years to enable our exit. Corporately we, the people of the UK, are in need of reconciliation, healing and restoration.

These three things are priestly tasks: significant and crucial tasks for those ordained priest today; but they are also the tasks of the whole priestly people of God. The bishop will remind the priests in his prayer that they are to work “in union with all their fellow servants in Christ”: in other words, they are to work with all who call themselves Christian, the royal priesthood of all believers - and perhaps we might well add “with all those of good will, to bring about reconciliation where there is division, healing where there are wounds and restoration where there are ruins.”

Reconciliation is often a painful process. In church life it is frequently the small things which produce conflict: the rearrangement of pews or people hanging on to small pieces of responsibility which have given them power in the past. Indeed, reconciliation is only needed when relationships have broken down, resulting in a lack of trust, separation and pain. In the process of reconciliation a crucial first step is to discover and celebrate what we have in common, or what hopes and aspirations we all share.

We have to discover what unites us rather than divides us. As Christians, we frame that way of seeing one another by recognising that we are all created in the image of God; created out of love and with the capacity to love one another - sometimes in costly ways.

In our creation we share a common humanity and a range of capacities to think, feel, imagine and create. That common humanity which embraces the citizens not only of Britain and Europe but of the whole world might be expressed in a paraphrase of those extraordinary words of Shylock in Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice:

“Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Polish workman hands? Hath not a Somalian refugee organs, dimensions, and senses? Hath not a lost child in the Calais jungle affections and passions? Is not a Sudanese mother fed with the same food, and hurt with the same weapons? Is not a man from France subject to the same diseases, or a woman from Germany healed by the same medicines?”
An amazing example of the affirmation of our common humanity was shown in Trafalgar Square ten days ago, when people of all colours and creeds joined hands and raised them together in solidarity, resolving to remember the murdered MP Jo Cox by working together to show the world that there is more that unites us than that which divides us.

Reconciliation begins when we hold firmly to that deep affirmation of all we have in common. As we saw those people in Trafalgar Square coming together in their thousands, desiring to shed differences, to reach across divisions and to find the resources to move forward together, we glimpse that “the harvest is plentiful”.

We are a nation in desperate need of healing. Healing was a large part of Jesus’ ministry on earth and a sign of how close the kingdom of God had come. Healing happens in numerous ways, but we can encourage healing by the way in which we speak. The Epistle of James reminds us that the tongue is an unruly member - and we have sadly heard quite a lot of unruly discourse recently.

The Archbishop of Wales commented about the referendum debate:

“The public attitude and language used has been venomous and offensive. In particular there has been so much venom spoken about immigrants and immigration that people have come to believe almost anything.”

We need to choose our words. Much has been said about politicians, as if they were a general breed rather than individuals. They have been categorised as self-seeking, power-hungry, incompetent, untrustworthy and ignorant - and indeed some have not covered themselves in glory. But a general description is blatantly untrue. Most local MPs work hard for their constituents, listen to their concerns, get involved in local community life and try to help the people they represent. Hasty or ill-considered words of criticism risk scapegoating groups or individuals whereby they become outcast, despised and hated. It is words of affirmation, forgiveness, appreciation, welcome and encouragement which bring healing and peace. As followers of Jesus we are called to speak words of love, graciousness and acceptance particularly into situations where people feel marginalised and forgotten in our communities.

In London last weekend, surrounded by hundreds of tourists, I found myself speaking words of welcome and wanting to reach out with hospitality just to say: ‘we love you and you are welcome here.’ As hundreds of placards were raised in Trafalgar Square with the slogan “Love as Jo loved”, we may have thought about the love that flows from knowing how much Christ loves us, the love that which truly heals. Tim Dixon, a friend of Mrs Cox attending the London event, said: “Jo symbolised something about this moment, where we are, that people want to come together and rise up in love over hate and hope over fear.”

As we witnessed people united by speaking words of hope, longing to find a way of remembering that would bring healing and trying to discover how to hold on to the vision of a different and better world, we glimpsed that “the harvest is plentiful.”

Since June 24th we have found ourselves in an uncertain and somewhat frightening place. The archbishops have helpfully given some guidance about how we as Christian people might respond to the new situation in our country:

“As citizens of the United Kingdom, whatever our views during the referendum campaign, we must now unite in a common task to build a generous and forward looking country, contributing to human flourishing around the world. We must remain hospitable and compassionate, builders of bridges and not barriers.”

Building bridges speaks of reconciliation; hospitality and compassion speak of healing; a common task of building a generous and forward looking country speaks of restoration. Restoration can never be just about putting things back the way they were, but of sifting through, and retaining only what is useful in the broader context of a vision for a better future. The cathedral in Guildford is undergoing a restoration of the building; but the aim is not to put it back as it was, because it was full of asbestos in the roof. Restoration will mean cleansing it of that poisonous substance and adding resources of light, sound and access which will make it more useful and beautiful.
Jesus looked at the crowds thronging around him and had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. That seems like a good description of many people in this country at present. As Christians we have a good shepherd. As we live, work and minister amongst those who seem lost we glimpse yet again that “the harvest is plentiful”. It can seem plentiful from two perspectives. First, because of the great positive aspirations shared by so many people to live differently in unity and love. Where is the source of love but in the love of God the Father who loves us? Where can unity be found but in the Cross of Christ – Jesus stretched out between east and west, north and south? Whence flows power for restoration but from the Spirit dancing between Father and Son and us? Yet the harvest also looks plentiful from a second aspect: that of the sense of hopelessness and loss felt by many people.

To gather a harvest we need workers who see the signs both of danger and yet of opportunity: workers who, without compulsion or manipulation, can use the opportunities of the time for God’s kingdom. We pray fervently with the bishop for those being ordained; that they may be faithful and effective in reconciliation, healing and restoration, and also skilful and committed in enabling God’s people to find compassionate, imaginative and loving ways of gathering the harvest – the harvest that is growing in an extraordinary way and in extraordinary circumstances.

Amen.