Today’s psalm is one of my favourites – first fully realized as a teenager on a Swiss mountain in a little church with the family – the French somehow brought it to life in that snowy setting - “Je leve mes yeux vers les montagnes...”…I lift my eyes to the hills! Where does my help come from? The Lord, maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip...he will watch over your coming and going, now and for evermore.”

We live in the Lake District, on the side of Skiddaw, and wake up every morning to the majesty of this beautiful hill, with clouds cascading over its summit! Psalm 121 reminds us that everything in all creation points us back to God. My work brings me in to close encounter with Jewish and Muslim colleagues and friends, and despite our clear and important differences, we share this conviction – giving thanks again and again to our Creator God.

The passage from John reminds us, however, that not all creation is perfect! The encounter with Jesus takes place in the midst of serious conflict with his Jewish elders. Jesus’ healing of a paralysed man on the Sabbath - the day of rest for his community, and still today for many of our Jewish friends - was one more nail in the coffin for those who misunderstood him. And Jesus longs for them to recognise who he really is. From the Jewish perspective, he is a heretic, a breaker of the law – and no doubt we too would have shared their concerns if there at the time. It is so easy to look back with hindsight – but a radical preacher in our midst today is just as likely to be hounded by the authorities and thrown behind bars.

We read in verse 16 that the Jewish leaders persecuted Jesus, and in v18, that they tried hard to kill him. This was no lightweight attack. His life was under threat. So what is his response to such divergent beliefs and resulting conflict? It is to point out his deep relationship with the Creator God, whom he calls Father (which would not, in fact, have been particularly shocking to his Jewish contemporaries – the greater issue is the implication that he is in any way equal to God).

Jesus says, (v19) “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all he does.....He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.” (John 4:17-23)

We see Jesus here confronting his religious elders. Speaking directly to those intent on killing him. He does not shy away from conflict. On a much less threatening scale, the common perception of reconciliation is that it means seeking agreement. We spend an awful lot of time and energy on the goal of agreement – in particular agreement with our own point of view. But actually, more often we have to embrace disagreement – learning how to articulate our differences, and to disagree better.

Jesus demonstrates humility, non-violence and spiritual discernment in his engagement with his elders. And he starts, like Psalm 121, by pointing upwards - bearing witness to God the Father. In fact he describes a kind of endless circle – starting with God the Father, through whom he is fully sustained, responding with his own life and actions, through whom God enacts His purposes......A circle of perfect submission, “and one we are called to emulate – never in our own strength, but that of our own Father God.
The key question on which Jesus’ conflict with the Jewish authorities rests is this – Who is he? Jesus does not ask his audience to rely on his word alone. In addition to his utter dependence on his father God for all he says and does, he identifies 4 key witnesses testifying on his behalf:

1. **The witness of John the Baptist (v33-35)**

   At the very beginning of the gospels we meet John, who “came as a witness to testify....so that through him all men and women might believe.” (John 1:6). John testifies that Jesus is the true light - light in the midst of darkness for every human (John 1:7). John himself is just the light bearer or lamp, not the light itself. John declares Jesus is the “the Lord” described in Isaiah 40:3; he describes him as the Lamb of God – the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the people; as one who baptises with God’s Holy Spirit (John 1:33) and who is, in fact, the Son of God (v34). So he doesn’t mince his words in speaking to his Jewish contemporaries! In doing so, he attracted crowds to Jesus, thus fulfilling his task of preparing the way for him. But the consequences were severe – persecution, imprisonment and ultimately death by beheading.

2. **The witness of Jesus’ own actions**

   In v36, Jesus introduces the very work that God the Father gave him in order to make the invisible God known. These included his preaching, teaching and miraculous healings, but ultimately his greatest action was to die and rise again - in order to take the punishment for the sins of the people, and thereby to save them, and ultimately to reconcile them to God. All the other actions of Jesus on earth point to this greater act - to reveal God and to execute God’s plan of salvation.

3. **The witness of the Old Testament Scriptures.**

   In v39-40, Jesus introduces the Old Testament Scriptures as his witness. Remember he knew these as his own Jewish Scriptures – the Hebrew Bible – which speaks about the coming Messiah. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus teaches that he had come to fulfil the Hebrew Scriptures, but the Jewish community do not see Jesus as that Messiah. In Luke 24:27 and 44, we read that Jesus explains to his disciples all that is said in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning himself. He clearly understood the Scriptures (our Old Testament) as pointing to his life and the ongoing work of the Father and to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

4. **The witness of Moses**

   For the Jewish community, Moses was the greatest prophet of all, the one to whom God entrusted His law, containing all that is required to live a life of obedience to God. He was not only the recipient of that law, however. He was also the one to whom God revealed the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible. Everything contained in the books or scrolls of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy was first given to Moses, including predictions of the coming Messiah. In today’s reading (v45-47) Jesus points to the testimony of Moses saying, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” Jesus knew that his own community would not believe him. He knew that disagreement would prevail, but continued to testify to his real identity.

So how is this relevant to us today? Living in a world of equal uncertainty, disagreement, persecution and death. A world in which religious belief is seen by many as the cause of violence, not peace. Jesus’ responses to his Jewish elders in this passage challenge and address the current uncertainty – not with a short fix but with a long-term solution.
**Three action words jump out** at the start:

Jesus says “I hear”, by which we understand his listening to the Father, and to all that the Father has taught and shown him (v20). Jesus came to communicate to humanity those things God wanted us to hear.

Jesus says “I judge” by which he refers to the day of judgement, at the end of time, when we come before God the Father, with Jesus as our mediator – pleading on our behalf.

Jesus says “I seek, not to please myself but him who sent me.” ... That promise is put to the ultimate test not long afterwards in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42) – Jesus’ last moments before his arrest and agonising death. At this final hour he submitted to his Father’s will, knowing the horrors of the cost involved. Without that act of obedience, we would not have experienced the gift of salvation. And without salvation, we cannot know the loving relationship that Jesus enjoyed between Father and Child.

It is this vertical axis of reconciliation between God and ourselves that enables us in turn to love, human to human. To energise and sustain our own ability to reconcile, whether within the family, our wider community, or those with whom we profoundly disagree. That is how I see the reconciliation ministry here at Coventry, and my own small part in serving you, Dean John, Bishop Christopher and the Archbishop. It is a cross-shaped ministry in which the vertical – God to us – allows the horizontal.....us to one another.

I am committed to a ministry that witnesses to this deeper level of reconciliation – a call to seek peace, not only with our neighbours and those we find easy to love, but even with our enemies – those most un-loveable in our communities. And this is only possible because of what God has already done so that we can be reconciled to Him. In our Isaiah reading (v24b-25), we hear God saying: “You have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. I, I am He who wipes/blots out your sins for my own sake, I will not remember them/your sins. This passage starts out by listing the faults of the people, stressing the burden on God – yet it takes a massive u-turn – When we human beings yawn and forget God, turning away from His ways, God forgives us – because of (not despite) the burden we have been – because otherwise HE would have no need to forgive! This is the sacrament of reconciliation, in which we the sinful/transgressors bring a different kind of offering to the animals and fruits of the Israelites. We bring our wrong doings, no matter how serious. And we keep bringing them, day after day, year after year, century after century, millennia after millennia. And God never tires of forgiving. Earlier in our Isaiah reading (v18-19) God says “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” What is this new thing? God’s ongoing act of creation – new and renewed.

In 1943 Deitrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell (at the time of the holocaust): “I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil. For that purpose he needs men [and women] who make the best use of everything......I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are turned to good account and that it is no harder for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds...

We live in a world that is clearly not reconciled to God or to one another, and yet we know that God’s act of salvation in Jesus was a once and for all act. So how do we square that? The profound mystery is that it is now....and not yet. It is a both...and scenario not an either or! So what is our response? To be utterly confident in our identity in Christ whilst still pressing on to that final goal – as Paul writes in Philippians (3:12-14): “Not that I have already obtained all this (eternal life) or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me....Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.”
That is my prayer as I start each new day and this new job.....“not in my own strength, but in Him who created and sustains me, and every one of us.” The ministry of reconciliation is rarely easy, but it is, I am convinced, one worth striving for.