There is a poem by that great Northern Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, a part of which I want to share with you in response to our readings this morning. It’s called ‘Doubletake’ and is part of ‘The Cure at Troy’. Here is an extract.

“Human beings suffer.
They torture one another.
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

History says, Don’t hope
On this side of the grave
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a farther shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing,
The utter self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there’s fire on the mountain
And lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is listening
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.
It means once in a lifetime
That justice can rise up
and hope and history rhyme.”
‘That justice can rise up and hope and history rhyme’. Our readings today, this second Sunday in Advent, speak of hope and history. Advent, the season of hopeful waiting. And Advent, the season for taking note of God’s history and our history, of who and what we have been. Of who we are in God’s kingdom, in God’s heart. In our ministry of reconciliation at this cathedral we deal daily with hope and history. One of our core values in the CCN, is Healing the wounds of history. And St Michel’s House, where we deliver our reconciliation programme bears the strapline, ‘making space for hope to flourish’. Healing the wounds of history and making space for hope. History and hope. These buildings themselves, the ruins of the old, and this new cathedral delineate history and hope. The history of Nov. 14th 1940 and the destruction of the old cathedral, and the hope of a new, transformed, reconciled life embodied in this new cathedral. The many stories we hear of conflict and reconciliation, of wounding and healing, are about history and hope. But these two words are easy to say. History and hope. But how do we actually live them? It’s a bit like Christmas and Advent, I think. It is easy for us as Christians to lament the commercialisation of Christmas...and so we should. But it is much harder to actually, really give ourselves to Advent. Because while we are here in church, in the cathedral, we do say the Advent words, we sing Advent hymns, we say, ‘Come, Lord Jesus’ but as the Precentor said in his sermon last week, are we really ready for him? Maybe it would actually be a mild inconvenience to our pattern of life if Jesus suddenly did come...

So how do we really give ourselves to Advent? How do we make the words we say in church congruent with our actions when we go out through the doors at the end of the service? Advent is a time to reassess how we live. How can we, how do we take part in God’s kingdom?

And so the words hope and history can fall into this same category. Easy to say, and also easy to tell ourselves and others our rhetoric, our narrative, our cathedral story. Of the history of November 14th, and the hope of Father, forgive on November 15th. Advent as a time of watching and waiting, a time for deep reflection on our lives with God and with each other, is a God given time to reassess how we think about and act on this story. What do we as Christians, and as people in this particular cathedral, mean for the world today? How do we open ourselves up to the wind and the power of God that we hear about in Isaiah, the vulnerability of the shoot growing out of the stump? The potentially costly life changing decision that John the Baptist urges us to make. And the consequences of not...

Because the evidence in front of us is not appealing. The reality of the history of the 20th and now the 21st century does not seem at first sight to be hopeful. Conflicts abound and new political eras here in Europe, and in America, the middle east and the global south are being levied – Seamus Heaney even in this poem says...

“History says, Don’t hope
On this side of the grave.”

A pretty gloomy message, if we just stop there. So how do we live with history and hope in these often dark times? Can hope and history rhyme? Advent is the time to decide. Do we stick with the world’s answers, or do we believe that the God who is always with us, the little child who is coming, changes everything? The poem goes on, “Believe that further shore is reachable from here. Believe in miracles and cures and healing wells.” So what do we believe about history and hope this Advent?
Isaiah in our first reading gives us some help. The situation in Jerusalem that Isaiah is referring to as the ‘stock’ of Jesse, or in other translations as a ‘stump’, is a political wasteland. The dynasty of David, the son of Jesse, has been defeated and humiliated. The stock, the stump, of Jesse tells of a cut down, despairing people. But the spirit of the Lord will rest on the new branch which will grow out of the roots. New life, new understanding, wisdom, counsel and might. The life giving, despair-ending breath of God. God’s breath will blow unpredictably, irresistibly. It is beyond our control. It will blow away our despair, says Isaiah. So do we stay with the history of despair, of the stump, of the cut off people? Or do we allow the new possibility, new life of God’s breath to enter us in hope? This is our task for Advent. We have to decide. Are we going to allow hope and history to rhyme in us? Are we going to trust this new breath of God to take us where he will? Into his kingdom, his grace, his judgement and his mercy...

The new branch out of Jesse is authorised by God... a new king who is good, and just. Who has understanding and knowledge, and power to make all things new. This king will not be arbitrary, or succumb to bribes or to propaganda or the trappings of celebrity and ego. Isaiah tells us, ‘He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide what his ears hear’... rather, he will act for the poor and meek. He will act on behalf of those who have no power, who are on the edges of our society, who feel lost and voiceless in the discourse of our public life. And gosh, this transformative way of governing will seem unbelievable in its scope! Wolves and lambs living together, leopards lying down with kids, calves with lions. All will be reconciled and restored. Where hope and history rhyme. And not just for us humans. Isaiah goes on to speak of all creation being included in this new order of justice. ‘They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’. Our human injustices to the earth – causing climate change, famine and the rest, will be swept up into the transformed kingdom of God in this new just reign. Hope and history will rhyme. And of course, this is Advent. Isaiah tells of a child three times in these verses of reconciliation and new life. The little child, the coming again of our Saviour brings the hope of trust, friendship and love. In this child, hope and history rhyme.

And then in our gospel reading we have John the Baptist. This vision of new life and restoration, of reconciliation that Isaiah gives us, this hope is not, can not be passive. John forcefully reminds us that we have to play a part in all this. We have to make a decision. To repent from the old ways, to turn around and embrace this new possibility... of a way of being, of living with God and each other that leads to transformation, to reconciliation with God and with all things. John the Baptist invites us into a new way, which is both costly and joyful. Jesus died on the cross, and yet was resurrected. If we are to repent and be cleansed in the water of baptism and the Holy Spirit, and follow this little child who is Christ, our Saviour, our lives will be full of his justice and mercy and love. Hope and history can rhyme. The resonance of this rhyming, of giving ourselves again to Christ this Advent, is indeed very good news! Good news that truly dispels the gloom and the darkness. If we are not to be paralysed by fear, by hopelessness in situations of conflict, of broken relationships, of worries about money or loss of independence or any of the messes we find ourselves in, we need to listen again to Isaiah’s words, and allow ourselves to be filled with this new breath of God coming in this little child.
So let’s pray that justice can rise up this Advent. Let’s believe that this little child blows away despair. Let’s invite others to share in this hope. And let’s find and embrace and practice the new possibilities of being the people of God in this place, in this time, in this great cathedral, with all its history and its hope.

In the words of the poet,

“That means someone is listening
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.
It means once in a lifetime
That justice can rise up
and hope and history rhyme.”

Amen.