It’s not often that we use visual aids in our sermons here in the Cathedral, but today is an exception. It would be obtuse to ignore the 70 foot high illustration in front of you, and behind me, which depicts the scene set out in our second reading this afternoon. It’s not, of course, to everyone’s taste: a well known description of the visitor to the cathedral has them gazing in awe and wonder at the baptistry window, the ‘ooh’, and then turning in perplexed uncertainty to the tapestry, the ‘er?’ I remember sitting in front of it for a couple of hours when I was wondering whether God might be calling me here as Dean, asking myself ‘if I could live with it’ … and eventually feeling that the figure of Christ had winked at me. Perhaps it was going to be all right. In a moving description on the Radio 4 programme ‘My town’, Pauline Black from The Selector speaks of coming and sitting in front of it after a friend took their own life, and in the presence of the gaze of Christ finding peace or strength to continue.

The Tapestry is the focus of the new cathedral, drawing he visitor, become a pilgrim, from the devastation of the ruins of the old St. Michael’s through towards a vision of glory – heaven opened, as the writer to revelation puts it. Rather than having an East Window in the building, Basil Spence wanted not to back light the altar, so as to somehow obscure it. At the same time, he wanted to draw people towards Christ, and so the idea of the tapestry was born. I wonder what you make of it?

Michael Sadgrove, a former Precentor of the Cathedral, wrote a whole book springing from the tapestry called ‘Picture of Faith’. He describes it as a ‘magic carpet’, crying the worshipper on a flight into reality at three levels – the reality of God, the reality of the world, and the reality of the person themselves. His book is a meditation which goes much beyond a simple commentary, suggesting that the tapestry ‘makes theologians of us all’, as it invites, even demands us to make connections and interpretations from the images which are, as Sutherland himself said, almost entirely ambiguous. That is inevitable, picturing as it does the view in heaven – something we can only begin to imagine, along with the writer of the passage in Revelation. ‘I saw a door standing open into heaven!’ Rather like one of the scenes in the Narnia stories, or the more recent Philip Pulman novels, who would not want to look inside? If you were to see a door open into heaven, what do you think you would see?

Immediately, the writer is taken through the door, it seems – and taken right in to this new place, this land. And there in heaven is a throne, with one seated on it. The image is drawn directly from the vision of Ezekiel in the Old Testament, and so is not, in fact, apparently an image of Christ, as in our tapestry. Yet there are the four living creatures, the emerald background, the sense of movement and life. Do we ourselves now take the role of the 24 elders falling down and worshipping? (And should we try worshipping facing Eastwards?)

Michael Sadgrove sees the creatures representing the ‘dance of the cosmos’, but also the four aspects of himself, following Graham Sutherland’s own description of the fearful calf, the eager man, the predatory eagle and the ferocious lion. Are they fighting, or playing – rebellious, or redeemed? And there on the side is St. Michael himself, bundling the crow faced Satan out of heaven. Jesus holds a glass in front of his face, for St. Paul reminds us that we see now ‘as in a glass darkly’. The Mandorla, the traditional halo surrounding the whole figure, can seem like womb, or a tomb. Perhaps one of the most wonderful aspects of the whole is the green setting – a rich, nurturing green. I’ve been told there are 300 different colours in it, though I’m not sure I believe it, but I do see the wonderful different shades, which reveal more and more, the more you gaze at it.

Today, there is an unfortunate banding across the tapestry. We are spending a great deal of money trying to work out causes it, and how to remove it. It’s been there for several decades. It seems likely that it is due to the movement of air in the building, drawing dust and dirt from the outside of the west screen, through the cathedral and up the chancel where we are sitting, and extraordinarily ‘hoovering’ it through the tapestry and up the or down the cold wall behind it. It’s quite annoying, but also somehow a wonderful image of life being drawn into and through the Cathedral, being filtered through the presence of Christ and promise of Christ glory, being deposited there and being sent, somehow, on its way. Can you see yourself being drawn into and through this presence of Christ in our midst?

Justin Welby, when he was a Canon here, used to come and pray before the tapestry on the nights before he travelled to war torn countries in the service of reconciliation. His favourite part of the tapestry is the human figure clamped safe between the 24 elders falling down and worshipping facing Eastwards (worshipping facing Eastwards?)

The weaving of the tapestry, once Sutherland had designed it, took a dozen women two years, working on a five hundred old loom in Felletin in France. The design itself had taken seven years, and much labour and wrestling. Today, it draws us into the life of Christ, and brings Christ close to us, in the complex designs and weaving of our own lives, which have themselves taken so
many years to come to where they are now. It’s not always easy to read meaning straight from the page of our own stories as we tell them to ourselves or one another. It’s often been observed that a life can be like a tapestry, and we can only see from below, where loose threads hang down and the picture can only be guessed at.

There is a life time of meditation in the tapestry, a life time of reflection in our lives. May we see Christ present in them, gathering them to glory and leading them home.