“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” I wonder if that is your experience of Christian faith – if you would count yourself a Christian – one of abundant life, “life in all its fullness” as an earlier Bible translation put it? As many of you know, I’m a big fan of the Christian Aid relief agency – one of their memorable slogans was, “we believe in life before death.” So do I – and I firmly believe that we find the route to life through sharing with Christ, and sharing with others.

We find ourselves in a political season. It’s rather surprising ... the election of the new mayor for the West Midlands combined authority did not seize the public imagination. There was a 26% turnout, and little razzmatazz about the whole affair. However, there were hustings here in the Cathedral, and a prior visit from the candidate who was actually elected – time will tell if the promises made, and the apparent interest in the Cathedral, and the cultural sector of which we are part, issue in actual priorities in policy and spending. Life in all its fullness would not be a bad aspiration for a local council, even across such a vast area as the West Midlands. The mutual safeguarding and enrichment of life which the political process is supposed to have at its heart, especially at the local level, is something to which the Church – and, indeed, many religious groups – is deeply committed. We rejoice here in being partners with many others across the City and region, even the nation, who are working for the life in all its fulness which Jesus came to give: a life free from fear, in which each person is able to fulfil their God given potential, to exercise their God given gifts, to know themselves loved and to be able to offer love to others.

The first recorded sermon – the speech of St. Peter in Acts chapter 2 – apparently results in a mass turning to Christ, and, crucially for us this morning, a whole new way of living: a new community. Here is the worked out way of living life in all its fullness, to fulfil the purpose of Jesus. Here in the Cathedral we find ourselves as the mother church of the Diocese of Coventry, whose purpose is to ‘Worship God, Make new disciples, and Transform communities’. It is a marvellous vision, entirely worthwhile and deserving of the wholehearted commitment which we give to it. This passage from Acts gives a picture of what a transformed community might look like. It is a community of hospitality, of generosity, a community of celebration and worship … a community which is deeply attractive in every sense: it looks good, and people want to join it.

How does this vision match up to our city – is it what we see around us? Do we see hospitality, generosity, celebration, in our City? What do you see as you walk through the streets of the City, through Broadgate or Fargo, through the precinct down to Ikea? I have loved the sense of community here in Coventry, but it certainly doesn’t touch everyone. (ref the Archbishop’s Letter)

On Friday night here in the Cathedral we had the Delia Derbyshire night – if you didn’t know, Delia Derbyshire was the inspiration behind the BBC Radiophonic workshop, best known for the Dr. Who theme tune, and she was born here in Coventry, in Coundon. On Saturday we had Belshazzar’s Feast, performed by St Michael’s Singers, the Warwickshire Symphony Orchestra, and an additional cast of thousands. Both events were occasions to offer hospitality and a creative, life filled experience to those who came – they were occasions to build the community of the city ... but were they expressions of the life, of the community, which Jesus came to build? Yes, in some ways they were – but there is more yet to do.

Last week we held our Cathedral’s Annual General Meeting ... thank you so much to all who came, and those who have generously agreed to serve this community as officers and group leaders for another year. We couldn’t do it without you. The event was really an opportunity to look hard at the reality of our community life together – recognising of course that the “cathedral community” is not just those gathered here on a Sunday morning, but includes both other congregations, on Sundays and through the week, and also the staff, and the volunteers, who do so much to keep this place going. We were, I think, cautiously encouraged to think that we may be on the right track
to fulfil the mission to which God is calling us, expressed in the three words, “Welcome, Worship and Reconciliation” – and to believe that we may even be on the right track to lay our hands on the resources to sustain that mission.

We recognised that we can only begin to do this with the help of God – the guidance and resources of the Holy Spirit to take us and use us to fulfil God’s purposes in this place. It is only as we serve Jesus Christ, the good shepherd, that we will play our part not just in creating a lovely Jesus-centred community to enjoy ourselves here (which I’m sure he wants us to do) but also to see the transformation of the City, the county and the Diocese, which is God’s wider purpose. In fact, almost uniquely amongst English Cathedrals, we are called to play a real part in the transformation of the world, through our calling to work in peace and reconciliation.

Our calling, I believe, is to serve God’s transformation of the world, what we sometimes call the bringing in of his Kingdom – but it is also true that we need to start with ourselves. We need to allow this Cathedral community (or whatever community you have come from today if you are a visitor) to be the yeast in the dough, the catalyst, the worked example, of the “life in all its fullness” we long to see in wider society (and which we hope and pray our newly elected politicians will work for). How might that happen?

Canon Kathryn spoke beautifully last week of the arms open welcome which we are called to give – and which is not always easy. We are good, in so many ways, at the arms up worship … well not so much physically arms up here in the Cathedral, but the attitude is there. And sometimes we can manage the arms around reconciliation, helping heal the wounds of division in our society as all find a welcome here, as we listen honestly to their stories and help them to be open to themselves, their hurts, and those who may have hurt them …. These are the heart of our transformed and transforming community. But I also need to talk about resources. I’ve not preached about stewardship – the sharing of all things in common of which the Acts passage speaks – yet this year. Some of you may be grateful for that. It does seem to be true, however, that periodic reminders of the sheer joy of generosity, the pleasure of giving, are helpful. Just as I have spoken of arms open to others, to God, to each other, we can talk of hands open in the same way. Hands which are open to give are also open to receive … you may well recall the story of the sadly disabled child who was unable to open her clenched fist until one day she was taken to see the richest, most expensive specialist who sported a magnificent watch chain with a gold jewel hanging from his waistcoat. A wonderful miracle occurred as the little girl’s fist unclenched as she reached for the jewel, and the midwife’s missing engagement ring clattered on the desk between them … to hang on to what we have taken, or even what we have earned or been given, can become a disability in the Christian community, impeding the receiving and not just the giving of generosity.

It takes a lot of money to form the transforming community which God calls us to here – it takes a lot of money to keep this building open, and even more to fill it with worship, and with welcome – and even more again to reach out to the world in reconciliation. We are actually doing fairly well, we think, this year. We have two wonderful new ways for the wider community to support what goes on here, through the Investors in Hope and Business Partners schemes. We are growing an exciting events programme. We are training more guides and welcomers, and moving our shop to the base of the tower in the ruins, where people already instinctively gather. We are finding new and exciting ways to work with the Bishop and the wider Diocesan family. And we are blessed with one of the most generous worshipping congregations in English Cathedrals – what you (we) and those who come to other services give is a higher proportion of our annual income than any other Cathedral, over 15%. And it seems to be holding up fairly well this year, so far – but we need it to increase, just a little, if we are to achieve our goal of the Cathedral breaking even. I very much hope that each member of our Cathedral community will consider over the next few weeks what they are able to give, and if they are able, to increase it in line with how God has been generous to them.

God sent Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit, that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Let us take joy in doing all that we can to be open to that life, to share it with others – to show our neighbours and our politicians what a rich thing the life of Christian community can be … and to be generous.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.