There are some conversations that stick in your mind for years, aren’t there? One that I remember is from when I was a curate in central London years ago and chatting with some members of the church youth group. Quite why we were talking about praying to the Virgin Mary I can’t remember, but we were. And in the course of the conversation, one of the young people said that he prays to the Virgin Mary because God and Jesus are a bit fierce and so he needs their Mum to put in a good word for him.

Now it may or may not be appropriate to invite the Blessed Virgin Mary to help us in our prayers. But here’s the thing: to do so for the reason that we need her to put in a good word for us because her Son is a bit fierce is at best questionable and at worst downright wrong.

One of the key words in this morning’s first reading from Hebrews chapter 2 comes in verse 17. It’s the word ‘merciful’ and it reflects a theme that recurs several times in this mysterious but wonderful letter to the Hebrews. It’s the thought that the one whom we worship as ‘Christ in Glory’ is as fully human as he is divine. That ‘the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father, the one through whom all things were made - that he, for us and for our salvation, [really did] come down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man.

Think of the contrast between, on the one hand, the majestic splendour of the figure represented in our tapestry, and, on the other, the frail vulnerability of the baby held in his mother’s arms in the Stalingrad Madonna downstairs in the Millennium Chapel. Both of these extraordinary images are telling the truth! And were the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews with us this morning, he or she would see our thinking about Jesus Christ to be shaped by the tapestry, yes, but not dominated by it. For what we celebrate at the heart of our faith is the love of a God who was prepared to identify with us to the point of becoming one of us... which has some really significant consequences...

Here in verse 14: ‘Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he [that is, Jesus] himself likewise shared the same things...’ He really did. ‘He was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew; and he feeleth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness.’ Why? Why couldn’t he have merely appeared to be human and so avoided all the unpleasantness that goes along with the human condition? Why did Jesus have to become a human being? The answer is simple but profound. Only through becoming fully and truly human could Jesus have fully and truly died. Verse 14 again: ‘Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might...’ Might what? What does the death of Jesus achieve that nobody else’s death could? ‘...so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’.

So how does that work? As we follow the passage through, there’s a quick detour in verse 16 but then in verse 17 we discover a bit more: ‘Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.’

The Letter to the Hebrews isn’t always easy for us to understand, is it? That’s because it was written for people from a Jewish background in the first century. For them, all this talk of a ‘high priest’ and ‘atonement’ would have clicked straight away. Whereas, for us, it can all seem rather odd. What’s the writer on about?
Well, perhaps the best way to understand this is to work backwards. The clue is in the last five words - ‘the sins of the people’. Our attention is being drawn to something we might prefer to avoid. But, as is so often the case, the thing we would prefer not to think about is the key to the truth. Just as, when being prodded by a doctor, the bit that makes you go ‘ouch’ is probably the bit that requires closer attention!

Stepping back to take the bird’s eye view then, the writer is saying that the reason the enemy of souls holds the power of death over us, the reason that death is such a problem for us, is because of the way in which our lives fall short of God’s standards, let alone our own. The ‘sins of the people’ are the big problem.

So what has Jesus done about them? Answer: he has made atonement for them. The best way of thinking about what ‘atonement’ means is to split the word up and see it as ‘at-one-ment’. It’s about bringing together those who have previously been estranged. It’s about removing barriers. It’s about encouraging reconciliation, a central aspect to what this Cathedral is all about, of course. This is what Jesus has done for us. As the writer will go on to explain in more detail later in this letter.

The way of dealing with sin under Old Testament law is to imagine it a bit like the children’s game of ‘Tag’ or ‘It’. Someone starts off by having, as it were, a contaminating lurgy. Everyone else immediately backs off in case the person who is ‘It’ touches them. Because as soon as the person who starts off being ‘It’ does manage to touch someone else, they become free and the person they’ve touched becomes ‘It’ instead. And so it goes on until ‘It’ ends up as the slowest child on the playground, taunted and rejected by everyone else.

Something rather similar went on in Old Testament times. Those who were aware of their sin and wanted to be forgiven would transfer their guilt by touching the head of a sacrificial animal. The animal would then be killed by the priest or sent off to die in the wilderness. On one special day each year, the Day of Atonement, this would be done on a grand scale by the high priest. But the idea is the same. The contamination of sin is taken away by being transferred to an ‘It’.

What the writer to the Hebrews is explaining is that this was all an illustration of what Jesus would do once and for all. The claim is that Jesus stepped forward and volunteered to be ‘It’ for the rest of the human race. So that when we, as it were, reach out and touch him, all our contamination, everything that keeps us at a distance from God, flows away from us and onto him. When he died, it’s as if all our sin and guilt died with him. That’s why he had to die. There was no other way to defuse the bomb of human sin. There was no other good enough. There was no other way to absorb and neutralise the poison of evil.

That’s why Jesus had to become fully and truly human. Otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to die. And if he hadn’t been able to die, he wouldn’t have been able to make atonement for the sins of the people. And if he hadn’t been able to make atonement for the sins of the people, death would remain as an enemy to be feared.

For death is one of three things. It is either the end, full stop. Or it is the trapdoor to whatever we understand by hell. Or it is the gateway to heaven. Not being sure which is what makes death such a fearful prospect. But the good news is that we can be sure which. For this is what Jesus died to make possible for us. He shared in our humanity ‘so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death’.

As we sang in our opening hymn this morning:

Hail to the great First-born,  
whose ransom-price they pay,
the Son before all worlds,
a human child today,
that he might ransom us
who still in bondage lay.

May each of us experience his liberating grace and find the true freedom at the heart of our faith in this holy Child.
Amen.