When I was a child – a significant, though not, dare I say, a huge number of years ago – I well remember world maps mounted on slightly bending hardboard which were predominantly pink. They formed a significant part of the backdrop to my developing life, a constituent part of my awakening identity. I lived in that oddly shaped little area of crinkly land centre left, next to, but not joined to, the biggest land mass on the map … but somehow that was clearly the nerve centre of these vast tracts of land which stretched across the Mercator projection.

I played from time with toys which were stamped ‘Made in Hong Kong’, which was all part of a piece, and I had an anorak with a cloth label in the collar which stated, ‘Empire Made’. I’m sure the rest of the house had all sorts of other items which were ‘Products of the British Empire’. We had New Zealand lamb for lunch on Sundays, and I knew that during the war my mother had been evacuated for safety from the industrial north west of England to the mid Western plains of Canada, a place that felt somehow like an extension of our own homeland.

As I grew older, I began, like many of us, to feel slightly – sometimes more than slightly, embarrassed by all of this. The Mercator projection was replaced on my university wall by the Philips projection, which does not skew land masses towards the wealthier nations, and ‘painting the map pink’ became a phrase to symbol inappropriate domination. Indeed, the word colonization became toxic, and rightly so.

Times change, for the better, or for the worse – inevitably, a mixture of the two. As the history of the British Empire – in common with other powerful economically driven and militarily protected empires created by European countries – moved through fragmentation, sometimes bloody, towards something new, we emerge, today, holding a somewhat fragile web of relationships in the Commonwealth. It is a gift that we have this to share – 53 countries, almost a third of the world’s population, a fifth of its land area across all six continents 14% of its GDP. We have largely managed the difficult transition from wrong relationship to right relationship – avoiding the pitfall of no relationship. It seems peculiar to me, as a not especially sporting person, that the primary symbol of our relationship now seems to be support – although to paraphrase another popular Christian saying, it’s probably true that the family that plays together stays together. It is of course also true that the family that prays together, stays together – because our relationships are not just with one another, but also with God.

So where does all that leave us today, here in Coventry? We are in a world shaken by change and transition; shaken with the efforts of people and nations to redefine their relationships with one another, with God, with their history – and to take control of their future. It would, I think, be extraordinary not to mention Brexit in this context: for many of us, a tragedy of huge proportions, for others a bid for freedom and independence, a chance perhaps to be the Britain we remember today? Yet relationships will endure, whatever happens in the next few years – they have to, because we are part of one human family, with a shared future, bounded by this one planet which we have to learn to share. What does it mean to be a human family? When do we step in to one another’s wars, as in Syria?

That, in the end, is the story of the commonwealth, and it put me in mind of the John Donne poem which I have asked Andrew Cullum to read for us:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. (MEDITATION XVII; Devotions upon Emergent Occasions)
Donne lived in a time of tremendous turmoil (1572 – 1631) – political, religious, and personal and this poem emerges from and addresses that context perfectly. It recognizes, in its reference to death and loss, the brokenness which challenges us, but also directs us not to turn our backs upon it, rather to embrace it as a shared reality.

In our readings today, we catch up with the disciples as they seek to come to term with shared loss ... and then discover that it is not so much loss, as transformation – albeit not at all straightforward. There is a line in the midst of the gospel, which I love: ‘While in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering’. Here is a group of people who are struggling to get their heads around something so unexpected, their heads simply can’t make space for it. And not only that, but there is something in the appearance of Jesus, both here and in other accounts of the resurrection, that clearly leaves even his closest followers uncertain as to whether this is indeed their Jesus or not: here, Jesus says, ‘look at the marks of crucifixion, in my hands, my feet’ – understand, it is me! A future, on the other side of death, transformed by God, will not look like anything we are expecting.

And so what does the future of the Commonwealth look like? It has already seen huge transformations, from the British Empire to the British Commonwealth, from the British Commonwealth to the Commonwealth of Nations ... where are we now? This network of disparate states shares some history, much of it troubled, still contentious, it has some links in the present ... what are we to look for in the future?

Our reconciliation ministry here in Coventry Cathedral has a great deal to offer as a context for these reflections. The Community of the Cross of Nails, itself an international network with its roots here in the UK, but with genuine leadership offered from around the world, has these as its three priorities:

- Healing the wounds of History
- Learning to live with Difference and to celebrate Diversity
- Building a Culture of Peace

There are real wounds of history still present in the Commonwealth – and the involvement with the Anglican Church in the history of the British Colonial expansion is not always something to be proud of. I was forcibly struck by this especially in my visit to New Zealand a few years ago, with the popular perception of the British as having ‘taught us to pray, and whilst our eyes were closed they stole our land’. Of course there are also many gifts that were brought through British occupation – we recall the line from the Life of Brian, and ‘What have the Romans ever done for us?’ History is rarely one sided. Amongst our celebrations, as our prayers today recognize, we have honest reflection and repentance alongside thanksgiving: that’s how life in families always is. To use our shared inheritance as an instrument of overcoming difference, as we are encouraged to do by Her Majesty’s Commonwealth message, means being honest about what that shared inheritance is.

And we continue to learn to live with difference and celebrate diversity, in ways that need to go much deeper than displays of ethnic dancing which have sometimes accompanied our classic commonwealth images from the Christmas Broadcasts. Learning from the richness of one another’s cultures, sometimes threatened by globalization, is one of the opportunities and challenges of our commonwealth relationships.

But of course the greatest goal is our last, which relates exactly to this year’s Commonwealth theme of a shared future: that of building a culture of peace. We have made many mistakes in our relationships, and we need to learn from them in order to have something to offer the world for the future. As we have reconciled our history, reconciled where necessary our differences, we have genuine and hard won gifts, tried and tested, which can be commended to others, and which will stand the test of time.

The Christian message is one of resurrection emerging from crucifixion. It is one that is embodied in our buildings here in Coventry, and which has its roots in scripture and the shared experience of those first disciples. It is, often, a mixture of wonder and disbelief: but it is a narrative to offer the world which is true to our human experienced, as touched and transformed by God. It is also, we believe, the story of the commonwealth – a story of relationship, not always right in the past, sometimes troubled and challenging in the present, but containing the seeds of hope for the future through which the blessing of God continues to be found.

*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, forever and ever. Amen.*