Full of good things though they are, I am not going to say anything about today’s Bible readings this morning. Instead, I want to say something about a profound experience some of us shared earlier in the week.

From Mondays to Fridays, Cathedral life is framed by Morning Prayer at 8.30 and Evening Prayer or Choral Evensong at 5.15. Everyone is welcome to join in, by the way, either by coming along in person or perhaps by joining in remotely at the same time, using the Church of England’s ‘Daily Prayer’ app if you’re into that sort of thing – or maybe using something called a ‘book’, also entitled ‘Daily Prayer’...

A central feature of each of these services are the readings from the Old and New Testaments. These aren’t chosen at random but are selected from the Lectionary, a systematic list of readings provided by the Church centrally which aims to cover most of the Bible over a period of two or three years.

For much of last week, the readings from the Old Testament at Morning Prayer came from the Book of Joshua, with its account of the conquest of the Promised Land – the modern territory of Israel/Palestine – by Joshua and the people of Israel. On Wednesday we listened as Cerys read Joshua chapter 8, the horrific account, in unrelenting detail, of how Joshua’s troops slaughtered the inhabitants of a city called Ai – all twelve thousand of them, men and women alike – apparently with the clear backing of God, indeed, at his express command.

After the service, we had a bit of a chat. What place does a reading like that have in public worship, especially the public worship of a cathedral dedicated to peace and reconciliation? Why do we have to read and listen to something so awful? Couldn’t we choose something else? What if an outsider had come to join in with us that morning? What would they have made of it? Is it good enough just to say that we read something simply because it’s in the Lectionary? Do we perhaps need a back-up list of rather gentler readings for use on such occasions?

So what are we to do with those parts of the Bible that appear to be so utterly barbaric? There may not be many of them – but the presence of any at all is deeply disturbing. How are we to think of them? The Book of Joshua is particularly perplexing in this regard. For it begins on such a positive note with a set of really fantastic promises made by God to Joshua as he takes over from Moses. Listen...

‘As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.’

Inspiring stuff. Who could fail to be encouraged by this? But then we realise that being ‘in possession of the land’ and being ‘successful wherever you go’, acting ‘in accordance with all that is written in’ the book of the law, enjoying prosperity and success, is all tied up with the appalling behaviour we find just a few chapters later.

What are we to make of it? After all, if the people of the time had managed, presumably, to misunderstand God’s intentions so catastrophically as they butchered the people of Ai in Joshua chapter 8, how can we be sure that they were right about anything else? How can we reject the nasty bits in chapter 8 as an aberration while holding onto the nice bits in chapter 1 for our comfort and encouragement?
One of the great gifts to the world from Coventry Cathedral is our Litany of Reconciliation, written 60 years ago by the then Precentor, Canon Joseph Poole. We say the Litany at noon every weekday, either here in the Nave or out in the Ruins – and on other occasions as well. It was inspired by the remarkable step taken by Provost Howard following the bombing of his beloved Cathedral in November 1940 – a story which those of us who belong to the Cathedral community know well.

News of the destruction of Coventry provoked widespread anger and an understandable desire for revenge. But Dick Howard’s response was in striking contrast. He had the words ‘Father, forgive’ inscribed on the wall of the ruined chancel. He was heavily criticized. “Surely,” people said, “Father, forgive them” would be more appropriate.” But he was determined. “There are no innocents,” he said. “We all stand in need of forgiveness; this understanding is the beginning of reconciliation.”

This is what we find expressed in the Litany of Reconciliation as it lists the seven deadly sins and invites the response ‘Father, forgive’ to each of them. We’re invited to acknowledge that the roots of the world’s problems are not simply ‘out there somewhere’ but that they lie within each of us. So that as we pray for the world, we are also seeking God’s grace and mercy for ourselves who, whether we like it or not, are bound up the world, sharing its burdens, sharing its grief, sharing its guilt. ‘Father, forgive’.

Which, I think, might be one of the reasons why Joshua chapter 8 belongs in the lectionary as much as anything else – and needs to be read and heard. Its violence is, of course, extreme and repugnant. We rightly recoil from it in horror – just as we do all the other examples of ethnic cleansing and genocide we know of in different places down the timeline of history and across the map of the world.

But we’re not to react as if we have nothing at all in common with the perpetrators. Not least because even just a few moments reflection makes it clear that much of the history of the so-called civilisation of the western world – not least the spread of Christianity – contains more than a trace of ethnic cleansing and even genocide.

By way of illustration, let me quote from a thoughtful commentary on the Book of Joshua: “The Western colonial powers, while certainly not the only ones committing such actions in world history, in many ways erased Native Americans and Australians from history and redrew the world map according to their own interests...” And again, “Christians in expanding societies hardly ever voiced concern about the colonial genocidal advance, choosing instead (even if only tacitly and maybe inadvertently) to enjoy the spoils of such advances... Even today, for example, Christians in North America and Australia still enjoy the use of the land of the natives that was forcibly taken away from them, with the indigenous communities still living in traumatic and reduced circumstances.”

Sin and its consequences, even the sin of Joshua chapter 8, is not just someone else, over there or back then. It’s me, it’s us, here and now, as well.

Later in this service, as we begin the Eucharistic Prayer, Sarah will say these words:

‘Father, we give you thanks and praise through your beloved Son Jesus Christ... who was sent by you in your great goodness to be our Saviour...’

For this is what we need. Someone to save us from our sin and for a different way of living. As we feed on him in the bread and wine of this holy communion, may we experience afresh the lifting of our burdens, the healing of our grief, the assuaging of our guilt and the infusion of his new life – that we may go out and, rather than continuing as part of the problem, may become part of God’s transforming answer in his hurt and hurting world. Amen.