Stumpy and his wife Martha went to the local Classic Air Show at Baginton every year. Every year Stumpy would say, “Martha, I’d like to ride in that airplane.” And every year Martha would say, “I know, Stumpy, but that airplane ride costs ten pounds, and ten pounds is ten pounds.”

This one year Stumpy and Martha went to Baginton and Stumpy said, “Martha, I’m 81 years old. I served in the RAF as an aircraft fitter for over twenty years and never flew. If I don’t ride that airplane this year I may never get another chance.”

Martha replied, “Stumpy, that airplane ride costs ten pounds, and ten pounds is ten pounds.”

The pilot overheard them and said, “Folks, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll take you both up for a ride. If you can stay quiet for the entire ride and not say one word, I won’t charge you, but if you say one word it’s ten pounds.”

Stumpy and Martha agreed and up they go. The pilot does all kinds of twists and turns, rolls and dives, but not a word is heard. He does all his tricks over again, but still not a word.

They land and the pilot turns to Stumpy,

“By golly, I did everything I could think of to get you to yell out, but you didn’t.”

Stumpy replied, “Well, I was gonna say something when Martha fell out, but ten pounds, is ten pounds.”

Ladies and Gentlemen... honoured guests... to our Veterans, our current serving military personnel, their families, to the members of the Air Training Corps, representatives of our military charitable organisations, our Civic representatives and to the people of Coventry... my simple message to you on this hugely significant day as we celebrate One Hundred Years of the Royal Air Force is this... Thank you for your years of loyal and humble Service!

This centenary year for the Royal Air Force provides unique opportunities to Commemorate, Celebrate and Inspire.

The Centenary year of the Royal Air Force, through the initiatives of RAF100, provides a unique opportunity to commemorate 100 years of extraordinary success, achievement and to mark the sacrifice of those who have gone before with respect and dignity.

RAF100 provides the opportunity to celebrate the professionalism and dedication of today’s Royal Air Force, which is airborne 24hrs a day and 7 days a week supporting the UK’s interests at home and abroad. The depth of talent and diversity enables the Royal Air Force to deliver on operations and humanitarian relief projects around the world.

RAF100 provides the opportunity to Inspire future generations by telling our unique story. As we enter our second century, the Royal Air Force has an exciting future.

At the very heart of who we are as a military community and our greatest strength... past, present and future... is the fact that we are a Service... albeit an Armed Service... and we are extremely proud servants to and for the nation. And it is that aspect of service that I wish to highlight and to emphasise today; and to suggest that at the very core of our service to and for the nation, our motivation – is the call and the imperative to love.

Our acts of service are the visible representation of our love... and are sustained by our love – for God and for our fellow human beings.
From our New Testament reading we heard these words: And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. 1 Cor 13 v 13 (NRSV)

Over the course of the next few minutes I would like us to consider:

- The service offered by the people of Coventry
- The service offered by members of the military community
- The inspiration and foundation for all our acts of service

1. The service offered by the people of Coventry:

I cannot stand here on such an occasion and not make mention of a very famous Son of Coventry... Air Commodore Sir Frank Whittle... born in 1907... joined the Royal Air Force in 1923 as an Apprentice Fitter and then subsequently went on in 1926 to accept an Officer Cadetship and then entered into flying training.

Sir Frank was an exceptional pilot and also a visionary engineer who originally patented and developed the very first Turbo Jet Engine – a major feat of engineering that truly revolutionised the world of aviation.

He was incredibly proud to wear the blue uniform and to serve throughout his years in the Royal Air Force. The city of Coventry and its surrounds have made an immense contribution to the Royal Air Force throughout the decades and particularly those decades surrounding the Second World War.

With the development of the airfield at Baginton and the industrial hubs surrounding the city – every military aircraft developed at that time and built had the imprint of Coventry throughout.

With the likes of the Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft Company, Alvis and Dunlop to mention only three - the production lines and skies were alive with the sounds of Whitley, Lancaster and then the Lincoln Bombers. And although not built at Coventry... the Supermarine Spitfire, the Stirling Bomber, the Airspeed Horsa Glider, the DH98 Mosquito and the Hawker Hurricane... all had essential parts designed, crafted and produced in the factories of Coventry.

In 1939 part of the airfield at Baginton was taken over by the Air Ministry for RAF Volunteer Reserve Training and by September 1940 it became the sector Station HQ for No.9 Group in Fighter Command.

The airfield then became home to No. 308 (Polish) Squadron with their Hawker Hurricane fighters; followed by No. 403 (Canadian) Squadron with their Curtis P40 Tomahawks; No. 457 (Australian) Squadron with their Spitfires and we must not forget No. 605 (County of Warwick) Squadron with their Spitfires – who remained at Baginton until August 1941 when they moved to Honiley.

Coventry – thank you for your faithful, professional and dedicated service... as well as your hospitality to many nations and peoples throughout the decades.

One quick important reference to the Royal Air Force and of its direct service to this Cathedral came in the form of an Operation known as Operation Fleche: A Westland Belvadere Helicopter from 72 Sqn was used to place both the 80ft high spire and then the 10ft high Flying Cross onto the spire of Coventry Cathedral towards the end of April 1962.

2. Our service as a Military Community:

There are simply for too many conflicts, campaigns and military operations – both in peacetime and in war... to mention each one by name... in which the men and women of the Royal Air Force and the Royal Auxiliary Air Force have given of their service... and many thousands have given of their very lives – but each one of them contain stories of great heroism, courage, fortitude and stubborn determination.

As a nation and as a community – we remember and offer our sincere thanks this day to the members of the Royal Air Force and the Royal Auxiliary Air Force – thank you for your faithful, professional and dedicated service.
However, there is one battle I will mention which took place on the tiny Mediterranean island of Malta during World War II and which also holds very significant memories for my own military service.

The Battle for and the Siege of Malta between 11 June 1940 – 20 November 1942 was one of the very darkest times of World War II and tested the limits of our military service to its very heights and depths.

One of the most amazing stories of courage and determination in the face of insurmountable odds throughout WWII and in the face of almost certain disaster arises from the Siege of Malta.

If you are unaware of its story I would highly recommend you take some time to have a read.

Air Vice Marshal Hugh Lloyd, was the Air Officer Commanding Malta at the time. Although not noted for his air tactics, he was an inspirational leader who sought to inject resilience and courage into those under his command and those seeking to serve the people of Malta.

At his underground HQ, he hung a sign outside his office that read: ‘Less depends on the size of the dog in the fight than on the size of the fight in the dog.’

Those serving on Malta at that time certainly knew they were in a critical and devastating fight for life or death. In recognition of such heroism, King George VI was very shortly afterwards to award the people of Malta with the George Cross for conspicuous courage in extreme danger.

But why should I mention Malta in particular?

From 1 Corinthians 13 come the words: ‘And now these three remain: Faith, Hope and Love... but the greatest of these is Love.’ Three simple words that we neglect at our peril... three simple words, which hold the key to the life of service that we were all born to live. The King James Bible... translates them as Faith, Hope and Charity! And there is a fascinating Royal Air Force link to those words too.

Many of the elements of the lifting of the Siege of Malta are truly miraculous... and none more so than the bravery and the heroic skill of the airmen who flew from the RAF’s Hal Far Fighter Unit on the island of Malta... and the now three famous Gloster Gladiator aero-planes named Faith, Hope and Charity!

Although outgunned and outperformed, the Gloster Gladiators of 1435 Flight held off the might of the German axis air force until relieved by the Hawker Hurricanes of 261 Squadron... and the squadrons of Spitfires that arrived off the stricken aircraft carrier HMS Eagle.

Just for your information... nowadays 1435 Flight based on the Falkland Islands has maintained its Maltese connections, with its Typhoon aircraft sporting the Maltese Cross. The practice of naming the four fast jet fighter aircraft serving on the islands has also been maintained: they are called F for Faith, H for Hope and C for Charity, after the legendary three Gladiators that once defended Malta, and then there’s the fourth... named D for Desperation.

I have spoken briefly of the service offered by the people of Coventry and of the service offered by those within the military community... but let me close with a brief mention of where our inspiration to serve might come from and how it may be sustained.

3. The true inspiration and foundation for all our Service:

A mere six weeks after the destruction of Coventry and its cathedral on the 14th November 1940 by German bombers, in a radio broadcast transmitted worldwide by the BBC at Christmas 1940 from the Cathedral ruins, Provost Howard addressed his audience and captured the very essence of service and its power to transform the world:

“What we want to tell the world is this: that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge; we are bracing ourselves to finish the tremendous job of saving the world from
tyranny and cruelty; we are going to try to make a kinder, simpler – a more Christ-Child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife.”

And ultimately, when one human being gives of themselves to another and seeks to offer their service in seeking to make a better, kinder and more inclusive world – they are walking and following in the very footsteps of Jesus Christ. At the very heart of our uniforms and at the very core of our oaths as service men and women is our commitment to Her Majesty the Queen... and in her name, we offer our service to the nation and to one another.

With these final few words from Her Majesty... I will come into land.

These words are also from another famous Christmas broadcast:

I hope that, like me, you will be comforted by the example of Jesus of Nazareth who, often in circumstances of great adversity, managed to live an outgoing, unselfish and sacrificial life... He makes it clear that genuine human happiness and satisfaction lie more in giving than receiving; more in serving than in being served. God sent His Only Son “to serve, not to be served”. He restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. For me, the life of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace... is an inspiration and an anchor in my life. A role model of reconciliation and forgiveness, he stretched out his hands in love, acceptance and healing. Christ’s example has taught me to seek to respect and value all people of whatever faith or none. It is my prayer... that His example and teaching will continue to bring people together to give the best of themselves in the service of others.

Thank you for your life of service and its contribution to a kinder, simpler – a more Christ-Child-like sort of world!

Amen.