I couldn’t sleep last night... just a few things going on in my head!! So I got up and made a cup of tea. I sat in the sitting room and looked at our things... that would soon be packed up and on their way with us to Holy Island. A photo of Desmond Tutu, the Father of reconciliation. Books on all sorts of things from war poetry to wild swimming. An icon of St Michael on the mantelpiece. An African elephant made out of wire and beads. A John Piper print of our burnt cathedral. Some Christmas decorations, but not as many as usual... we are after all moving soon. And I thought of what is to come as we prepare to leave Coventry and move north.

And I’m not the only one moving. We are all also moving through Advent. Advent is usually known as a time of waiting... to prepare for the good news. But I think it is more active than that. Advent is a verb, an action. It translates as ‘to come’.

So what is to come? This Advent, what are we coming to? What is the world coming to? In the light of Brexit, Trump... and and and... What is Jesus coming to this year? Peace on earth? No.

This question of peace of earth is what we are about here at Coventry Cathedral. And so I have a question for you this morning. It is a question I ask when I teach about peace and reconciliation. If you had a superpower that could bring about world peace, what would it be? Just have a think or a chat to your neighbour about what your superpower would be. Be as creative as you like... think Superman or Wonderwoman... any superpowers here? How close can we get to world peace here this morning? Any thoughts...?

Over these last 4 or so years I have done a lot of thinking about this. About what peace and reconciliation actually mean. About what is needed to live those words. About justice and salvation. During this time of the coming, growing light of Advent our tilt towards peace, justice and salvation must be in sharp focus. In our nation in political turmoil. In a Europe where clashes between right and left are becoming ever more bitter. In a world where more walls are built to keep people out, to make them ‘other’, to polarise how we think and feel.

John the Baptist is warning us of what might happen if we don’t bear fruit... the axe is ready at the foot of the tree. ‘What then should we do?’ ask the people, the people who have followed John into the wilderness, who have momentarily left their Christmas shopping, left their mince pies and mulled wine. I wonder if the people followed John into the wilderness because they were longing deep in their hearts for good news. They didn’t quite know what that good news might be, but they knew that there must be something better than watching the headlines scroll or trying to decide whether the next political debacle is fake news or just yet more bad news.

So John begins by grabbing their attention – and my goodness, if you had traipsed after him into the wilderness longing for good news would you expect to be called a brood of vipers?! ‘What then should we do?’ they ask him. And his answer is perhaps rather unexpected from such a wild prophet. He doesn’t tell them to overthrow the government, or to be politically savvy. The heart of his message is simple. He tells the people to share, to be honest, to be satisfied and not to be greedy or corrupt.

So what then should WE do, here, today? Well, it’s simple. Share, be honest, don’t be greedy. Or, here’s another way of putting it. ‘The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own. Father, forgive. The greed
which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth. Father, forgive. Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others. Father, forgive’... not to mention the rest of our Litany of Reconciliation that is said here and across the world every day.

John’s message is calling us to the forgiveness and the good news that is the coming of Jesus... the word made flesh. And here at Coventry Cathedral, we have been tasked with a particular working out of this calling to the good news. We call it reconciliation. The simple heart of the gospel message. When I have been travelling around the UK and the world presenting crosses of nails or teaching about reconciliation or working with those in conflict, I have often been asked, ‘What can we do about this war?’ ‘How can I forgive the one who hurt me?’ ‘Why don’t they listen to me?’ Variations on the ‘What should we do?’ question. And the answer is strangely simple. It often feels unconvincing. And usually not what people want to hear. Share, be honest, don’t be greedy, John the Baptist tells the people. And that is what reconciliation is. Share, be honest, don’t be greedy. Sorted. Peace on earth? Well, easy to say, not easy to do. But doing it is what we must.

Because reconciliation is about more than words, it is about action. It is maybe a good start to learn how to disagree well, but it is the action towards justice and equality that we have to learn how to do, to practice. We know we don’t get it right all the time. I certainly don’t. Father, forgive... And yet we have been given this mandate, this calling to be reconcilers, and in Coventry and the CCN across the world we have been given a particular story stemming from November 14th 1940, and we HAVE witnessed the transformative hope and joy that reconciliation can bring. Look around you at this beautiful building. We’re sitting in that hope and that joy.

Acts of reconciliation are something we can all do. We should all do. That is the gospel imperative. That is why we look forward again for Christ to be born among us. We are all born God’s children, and as God’s children, we are reconcilers. All of us are called to inhabit this space of reconciliation. And as we are all in need of it, we can all join in with it. Reconciliation can start with sitting down at the table and listening. Sharing a meal. Inviting someone in. Share, be honest, don’t be greedy.

Reconciliation is not about sitting around trying to agree with each other. It is about learning how to engage authentically with issues of justice, of poverty, of exclusion, of stigma, of sustainability.

Our world is broken, and reconciliation is the only answer, unlikely as that sometimes seems. There is a Southern African word, ‘Ubuntu’, which means ‘I exist because you exist’. We are all connected and we are all God’s children. Practising reconciliation together isn’t easy. It is risky and hard and long. But it is the only way to live and love – each other and our planet.

We need to inhabit a space where risk and vulnerability and openness and freedom can live creatively together to bring joy and hope. That is what the Advent space is about. The risk of a new way of life, of inhabiting a space which enables us to be free enough to be vulnerable, to be surprised, to be open to the reconciling birth of Christ. That space is not safe or easy. But it’s safe enough for us to practice reconciliation. Share, be honest, don’t be greedy. Live and love.

My prayer for us all is, that this time of Advent, of coming and going, may be surprising, may give us a new way of being in our space with God, may enable us to resist the temptations of comfort, sameness, familiarity. That we may bear the fruit of reconciliation. The reconciliation ministry of this cathedral and the CCN is needed in the world. It’s needed here in this space, its needed in our communities, churches, nations, our own hearts.

This space here in this burnt and rebuilt cathedral can be a safe enough space for the reconciling love of Christ to be born again into. But only if it is intentionally held to be so. Only if reconciliation is truly at the heart of this incredible space.
I’d like you to really look around you again. Look at this space. It’s such a gift. It has such potential for transformation for all who come here, and those across the world who can only hear the story or see the photos. It is your gift to share. And you have certainly shared it with me during my time here. I will never forget what I have learnt from this space – it hasn’t been a safe space, but it has been safe enough. And that is what reconciliation is about. Being enabled and enabling others to share a safe enough space to hear, to listen, to better understand, and ultimately to learn how to live better together. Or, in other words, to share our space, be honest in our space, and not be greedy about keeping our space to ourselves. A space for living and for loving.

And so I preach this sermon with gratitude... for the space I have been enabled to hold here, to inhabit with you for a while, to share with you comings and goings, sadness, joy, laughter (my wonderful reconciliation team and friends put on a reconciliation pantomime for me on Friday evening... wow!! is all I can say!! ask them afterwards and they might perform it again over coffee!), as well as sharing the mundane and the surprising and beautiful nature of our life together. It’s been quite a journey, with quite some comings and goings...

It has been such a privilege to share your stories, and the story of this remarkable space that is Coventry Cathedral. A safe enough space which is not just a building, but a space built for relationship, for reconciliation... for you and me and all of God’s children. A safe enough space built especially for relationship with the one who cherishes and protects and watches over us... the one on that great tapestry up there. The one whose birth we await again this Advent.

The liturgy for presenting a cross of nails to a new partner has a wonderful section which goes...

Cherish this Cross, as a token of the merciful forgiveness of God, declared to us in the Passion of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Watch about this Cross, in prayer for one another and for all the partners of the Community of the Cross of Nails around the world.

Guard this Cross as a symbol of your strength to work and pray for peace justice and reconciliation and live at peace with all people as afar as it depends on you.

And so I thank you too for cherishing, watching over and guarding me in my comings and goings. And I ask you to keep watching over, cherishing and guarding each other, those who work and worship in and visit this space safe enough for reconciliation, for kindness and generosity and love. The world today still needs those words of Provost Howard which I have carried with me in the (mostly?!?) safe enough spaces I have travelled to and from in these last few years – Burundi, Iraq, South Africa, Cuba, Coventry. Don’t ask about the travel insurance! Provost Howard’s words... ‘We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler – a more Christ-child like sort of world’. Yes, let’s.

As I finished writing this sermon in our sitting room last night, the birds had started singing. Still in the darkness. But the sound of dawn. It reminded me of being in Iraq last year and waking up on Easter morning near the destruction of Mosul to an amazing sunrise, and the light of Christ coming again. And in our sitting room I looked around again at our things, waiting to be packed up. And learnt just what a gift I’ve been given over the last years here in Coventry. A gift that has enabled me to share this wonderful reconciling safe enough space with you all. So thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Rather fittingly, today is Reconciliation Day in South Africa, and so I want to finish with a story about Steve Biko and his mother Alice. You may have heard me tell it before, but it bears repeating, especially on this reconciliation day. Steve Biko was a well-known anti-apartheid leader and in 1977 was brutally murdered while being held by the South
African police. Steve and his mother Alice were talking shortly before his death, and she was telling him how much she worried about him – she couldn’t sleep at night until he was home for fear of him having been arrested and put in gaol. He replied by reminding her that Jesus had come to redeem his people and set them free.

“Are you Jesus?” she had asked impatiently. Steve had gently answered her, “No, I’m not. But I have the same job to do.”

And so do we. Amen.