Friends, it is a great joy and an enormous privilege to worship with you this morning.

I have always wanted to visit this cathedral, actually these two cathedrals, the one built along medieval lines, bombed and burned on November 14, 1940; the other conceived along modern lines, constructed and consecrated on May 25, 1962. Somehow, with no recollection as to how, I have a copy of the souvenir publication commemorating the consecration. I cherish how it speaks to the sacredness of this entire place, this place of pilgrimage for all who yearn and labour for a world that is more kind, just, and peaceful for all peoples, for the coming of God’s reign in all its fullness on earth as in heaven.

In the aftermath of that terrible wartime strike, the Provost of the day, Richard Howard wrote, “All night long the city burned and her cathedral with her, an emblem of the eternal truth that when men suffer, God suffers with them. Yet the tower still stood, with its spire soaring to the sky, an emblem of God’s over-ruling majesty and love.” He went on to write, “Even as the whole cathedral lay open to the sky the next morning, the vow was made that it would rise again, more splendid than before.”

And splendid it is, - its design, its great West Screen, its amazing Baptistry Window, its great tablets of stone, its tapestry of Christ in glory and visible only as one leaves the altar to into the world.

Splendid too, indeed so sacred, are the beautifully preserved ruins. Amid the lead splashed walls and around the altar with its cross of charred beams from the roof, there is a grace that draws people in to walk and whisper, to ponder and pray. The old cathedral still lies open to the sky, open as it were to God’s great design for heaven and earth to be held in a single bond of peace.

Soon after the consecration of the new cathedral, the Bishop of Coventry noted in an interview “the bombing of the old cathedral had a very real impact on the peoples of the world; and that Coventry was destined to be a place of reconciliation for the nations”.

And so it has become a place of pilgrimage for millions of men and women, old and young of every nation under heaven – eager as they are to come here to learn and understand something about the nature and practise of reconciliation entrusted to us by Christ himself.

My colleague and travelling companion, Archdeacon Paul Feheley and I feel especially blessed to be among that vast company whose hearts are deeply moved by the experience of walking through these two cathedrals – the ruins of one and the wonders of the other, together a sign of Christ crucified and glorified.

“Together indeed”, wrote Provost Howard in 1962, “they declare to the world this immortal truth that all human experience united with Jesus Christ in a painful and sorrowful crucifixion, will issue in joyful and glorious resurrection”. Lovely words to recall as we come to this Fifth Sunday in Lent and anticipate even today the solemnities of Holy Week and the great joys of the Easter Festival. I want to thank the Dean for his guided tour yesterday and for his invitation to preach this morning.

The Gospel is the well-known story of The Anointing of Jesus. In her commentary on this event, Jane Williams points out that John places this lovely and intimate act between two brutal sets of preparations for Jesus’ death. One the one side is the plotting of the religious authorities in formulating a charge of blasphemy against Jesus. On the other, is the scheming of Judas to betray him.

John places the anointing in the home of Martha and Lazarus and Mary. It was for Jesus a place of sanctuary, a home of gracious hospitality, a haven for rest and refreshment. There was Martha, attentive as ever to preparations for the
meal they would share. There was Lazarus having been raised from the dead just a few days before. There was Mary content as ever to have Jesus at home once again.

As the story unfolds, it is clear that at least a few of the disciples were with Jesus as well. The meal and the conversation continued in its usual manner...and then up from the table Mary rose and over to a cupboard she went. Appearing with a jar of very expensive oil kept for particularly special occasions, she approached Jesus, knelt down at his feet and poured the oil all over them. She set the jar aside and breaking all social conventions she loosened her hair and used it to wipe his feet.

One wonders if as she was doing this, she may have been recalling the words of the prophet. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the One who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who announces salvation, who says to Zion ‘Your God reigns.’”

Of Mary’s gesture, Jean Vanier writes, “It was an audacious act of love and devotion to Jesus”.

The disciples not understanding what Mary was doing, began to mutter among themselves and Judas blurted out his dismissal of her act as reckless behaviour, a great waste, - for had that oil been sold the proceeds would be given to the poor. Jesus broke the muttering as he said, “Leave her alone” and went on to speak of how she had bought this oil and kept it for the day of his burial. Mary was the only one who seemed to have any inclination as to what would happen in coming days. She knew and Jesus knew that by custom, one does not anoint the feet of a living person, but only the feet of a corpse, as part of the ritual in preparation of a body for burial. As the New Testament scholar Raymond Brown writes, “Mary’s action is prophetic”.

One wonders too, if Mary’s act was not in some manner an expression of her deep yearning to be united with Jesus in that hour of which he had so often spoken, in that lifting up from the earth, in his death and in his burial, in his going away and in his coming again.

I am always struck by John’s notation in this story. “That the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume”, - the sweet fragrance of Mary’s devotion to Jesus.

We cannot think of her extravagant devotion and not feel compelled to ponder our own, - as individuals, and as communities of faith drawn together in Christ. What of our devotion? How generous is it? How lavish, how utterly extravagant?

The fragrance that filled that house in Bethany has indeed lingered through time, even to our own day – filling this and every house of prayer and praise, - inspiring us to emulate Mary’s devotion to Christ, not only in worship, but in our work in the world in obedience to the Gospel.

And so it is that we sing:

“Being of beings,
may our praise your courts with grateful fragrance fill;
Still we stand before your face,
still hear and do your sovereign will;...”

In a world that is rife with the stench of poverty and the deprivation with which so many millions of people suffer. In a world that wreaks of the odour of racism, blatant and systemic; in a world that is not unfamiliar with the whiff of arrogance of every kind, - political, social, cultural and spiritual; in a world that is not unfamiliar with the smell of Islamophobia, anti-Jewish sentiment, or intolerance of any religious tradition. In a world where we can detect the scents of homophobia, the traces of gender-based violence, gender based inequity of opportunity for education and meaningful work. In a world where all this is wafting about, the Church is called to be known for such a fragrance of devotion to Christ and his gospel as tends the poor, as draws people together into communities marked by full inclusivity, a deep and abiding respect for the dignity of one and all before God, a generosity of spirit one toward another, a kindness, a tender heartedness, a justice borne of God; an extravagance of effort in reconciling the peoples of the earth, a repairing the breaches, and restoring the streets; a lavishness of love that sustain the hope of
the poor, a diligence in labouring toward that day when as the Psalmist writes, “mercy and truth springs up from the earth and righteousness looks down from heaven”.

As the sweet fragrance of Mary’s devotion to Christ filled that house in Bethany and lingered indeed through time, so may our own devotion to Christ and his gospel fill those places where we meet and indeed linger about in our communities.

Out of these hallowed grounds, the old and the new wafts a fragrance for which they are renowned throughout the world. The fragrance of reconciliation “healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and celebrating diversity, building a culture of peace”. The fragrance of that Litany of Reconciliation prayed every day in this place and in other churches throughout the Anglican Communion associated with the Community of the Cross of Nails.

“THE LITANY OF RECONCILIATION

Leader All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

    The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,
All    Father, Forgive

Leader The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,
All    Father, Forgive

Leader The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,
All    Father, Forgive

Leader Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,
All    Father, Forgive

Leader Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,
All    Father, Forgive

Leader The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children,
All    Father, Forgive

Leader The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,
All    Father, Forgive

Leader Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
All    Amen.”

In its read of the world, it is as contemporary as the day it was first penned. In its confessions of the sins of humanity it is honest. In its brevity it is memorable. In its simplicity, it is powerful. It captures the essence of our prayer through our Lenten journey, - that God creates in us new and contrite hearts, that acknowledging our sinfulness, we might be forgiven, that in our intention to lead a new life following the commandments of God and walking henceforth in his holy ways, we may find grace and strength.

“The whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” with the extravagance of Mary’s act of devotion to Christ.

As we remember this lovely moment on the very eve of our Lord’s Pasion, Death and Resurrection, may we be mindful of our vocation as St. Paul puts it, to be a sweet fragrance to God in Christ (2 Cor. 2:15), a sweet fragrance that lingers wherever we go and in all that we do.

May it be so this and every day.