Thank you for your welcome – especially today as we offer to God our fears, our anxieties and, for many of us, our sense of bewilderment and sorrow following the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union on Friday. I am so glad that it has been possible to complete the formalities for you to join the Community of the Cross of Nails today – a clear declaration that, whatever the political tensions between the nations to which we belong, we in Coventry, you in Brussels, together with our partners in well over 200 other centres around the world, are committed to sustaining friendships, building bridges and working for the peace and healing of our hurt and hurting world. For how very good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity...

A little more about that later...

First, it’s rather fun, isn’t it, to be dedicating Charlie on the Feast of the Presentation? There are some obvious parallels between Mary and Joseph bringing the infant Jesus to be blessed by Simeon and Anna in the Temple, and Quentin and Sarah, along with Juliette and Ben, bringing the infant Charlie to be blessed here at Holy Trinity this morning. All we need now are a couple of pigeons!

At another level, though, the parallel doesn’t feel quite right. Paul and John will hopefully find a measure of fulfilment in the service which they lead this morning. But we’re not anticipating that after the service they will think, ‘Right, that’s it, job done – now it’s time for us to retire!’ Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace? Well, yes, but please come back tomorrow, both of you!

No, there’s a glorious ‘once-for-allness’ about this encounter in Luke 2. It’s uniquely wonderful and unrepeatably special. After all, amazing though Charlie undoubtedly is, even his parents would hesitate before saying that they have ‘seen God’s salvation, which he has prepared in the presence of all peoples’ in their young son.

But it’s true of Jesus. Which is why Simeon is so excited. This is what he has been waiting for. At last! The consolation of Israel. The fulfilment of his hopes. The darkness of the centuries transformed by the light of the world. Pious dreams turned into solid reality.

With all that is being said about Jesus here, it comes as little surprise to be told in verse 33 that ‘the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him’. You would be, wouldn’t you?

Well, Quentin and Sarah, I wonder whether you will be amazed at what I want to say about your child this morning...

You see, what we celebrate today about Jesus being presented in the Temple is only worth celebrating because, actually, we can say rather similar things about Charlie. This is what the consolation of Israel is. The transforming effect of the coming of the Messiah – on the world in general through individuals in particular. Individuals like Charlie. So that, as he is brought up to know, to love and to follow Jesus Christ, we can confidently expect that we will see God’s salvation in him. He will be one of those through whom the light of Christ shines in the darkness.

Listen again to today’s Collect...

‘Almighty and ever-living God, clothed in majesty, whose beloved Son was this day presented in the Temple in substance of our flesh: grant that we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts, by your Son Jesus Christ our Lord...’

The way for us to be presented to God with pure and clean hearts stems from what we recall today about the infant Jesus being presented in the Temple. Presented ‘in substance of our flesh’, ‘like his brothers and sisters in every
respect’, fully identifying with those he came into the world to save. In one sense, this is when his ministry began. It was through this event, and everything that followed from it, that Jesus blazed a trail for us to follow. A trail that leads to us becoming ‘participants in the divine nature’. The good news of our faith is that we can become the adopted sons and daughters of the living God through Jesus Christ.

That sounds great, doesn’t it? Being able to say ‘Our Father in heaven’ and mean it. Relishing the sense of dignity, worth and security which comes from such a relationship with God. But we need to know that this is a coin with another side to it.

My wife and I have twin sons who are now 18 years old. One of the features of family life which has sometimes given rise to mild dissent over the years are the discussions about which particular qualities the boys have inherited from which parent. ‘You are your father’s son!’ is something their mother has often said – usually, for some reason, in response to one or other of their various misdemeanours... No, I can’t think why either!

But in God’s family, ‘You are your father’s son’, ‘You are your father’s daughter’, is exactly what Jesus wants us to be able to hear – consistently and regularly. For in God’s family, reflecting the Father’s likeness is precisely what we’re called to do.

Our focus this morning is on one particular characteristic that he shows – and that’s the fact that he isn’t at all choosy about those whom he chooses to love and to bless. His gifts of grace are poured out indiscriminately. And so, reflecting what he is like, echoing what he does, we too are called to the costly business of being as committed to the welfare of our enemies as we are to the welfare of our friends – to the point where our enemies actually become our friends.

Which brings us to the wonderful story of the Cross of Nails...

Coventry and its cathedral were bombed by the Luftwaffe on the night of November 14th 1940. The following morning, the Provost, Dick Howard, walking round the still smoking ruins of his beloved cathedral, resolved not to hit back, but instead committed himself to forgiving those responsible and working towards reconciliation and friendship.

Just six weeks later, on Christmas Day 1940, he broadcast to the British Empire from the Cathedral ruins. “We are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge,” he said. “We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler, a more Christ Child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife.” Echoing the words of your own Edith Cavell on the eve of her execution: “…as I stand before God and eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.”

The Community of the Cross of Nails is a worldwide fellowship of churches and other organisations who are committed to the hard work of making this real, of turning enemies into friends. The Cross of Nails emerged as an early symbol of what Coventry Cathedral came to stand for. The very first one emerged as a local Coventry priest, playing around on his kitchen table with some of the medieval roof nails that he had picked up from the ruins, formed three of them into a cross. So began a chain of events that brings us here today...

Because it is supremely the cross of Jesus that inspires us, motivates us, energises us, a constant reminder of the greatest act of ‘love for enemies’ there has ever been.

The thing is that receiving a Cross of Nails is not just about being presented with an attractive ecclesiastical ornament. It means willingly embracing all that it stands for, not least the commitment to live in way that enables enemies to become friends, to build bridges across seemingly impossible divides, to be those who make peace and reconciliation a priority in their lives. This is what I invite each of you to commit yourselves to – as individuals as well as the community of God’s people in this place – when we come to the presentation of the Cross a little later.

May God, by the power of his Holy Spirit, enable us – all of us, from the youngest to the oldest – to be so transformed by the good news of his reconciling love that, through us, bridges are built and enemies become friends. Amen.