It’s Mothering Sunday – and what a strange day it is! You probably know that the origins of Mothering Sunday, to have the chance to come home to the mother church along with our earthly mothers – and we are at a time when neither of those things may be possible. This is a closed service, with only four of us here – myself, Kathryn, Kerry playing the organ and the Head Verger, behind the camera.

Oh yes – actually of course there are five of us here. This is a Eucharist, and we celebrate the presence of Jesus here, in word and sacrament. So that’s five – just about within the archbishop’s guidelines.

Ah – and there are the saints, and angels – some of whom are captured in light in our great west screen window, winging and singing around us … and many thousands of others besides, invisibly and illegally filling the air right beside us, uniting us with one another in time and space.

We are alone, but we’re not alone. Like many of us, I’ve been spending a lot of time on telephone and video conferencing this week. It’s been strengthening our relationships. I know some have been challenged in these days by the verse from the letter to the Hebrews, do not neglect to meet with one another: well, I’m glad to say we have continued to meet. In fact, there have been an awful lot of Cathedral and Diocesan virtual meetings as we have been working out how to navigate these uncharted waters.

Still, for all that it feels really hard on this day of all days not to be able to put our arms around our Cathedral community, so to speak, and our Diocesan family. We are the Mother church of the diocese, and that is very important to us here. It’s hard for a mother not to be able to hold her children. Many many mothers in the world know that experience only too well – of heart rending, searing loss, as a result of war, or famine, or disease. We are separated now, and although we are joined by the love of God it still hurts.

So what might God have to say to us in these hard times? It’s Lent, a time of deprivation in order to concentrate on prayer. Each day of course we are holding the Diocese in our prayers in our daily morning prayer and Eucharist service, using the daily prayer cycle, along with the daily prayer cycles for the Community of the Cross of Nails and the Anglican Communion. Maybe this is a time to develop new disciplines of prayer, which might continue in the years to come.

It’s also a time to build community. Our New Testament reading, from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, urges us to be completely committed to one another, learning to bear with one another and gracious with one another. So far, I think care and compassion have outstripped frustration – but stressful times can have an impact on our relationships, and we can fall out as a result. It’s good to seek God’s grace to hold us close to himself and one another.

And it’s a time to draw close to Christ. Our Gospel reading this morning reminds us that Jesus brought pain to his mother as well as joy, because of the path he was called to tread. Yet ultimately it was the path of life. I’ve been much helped by Lent prayer, that walking the way of the cross we may find it the way of life and peace. Here in the Cathedral we know a lot about the way of the cross, a way that is thrust upon us and leaves us devastated. It’s hard, today, to reconnect with the searing and terrible loss of November 1940 – especially because we now have this beautiful Cathedral. But this pandemic is an experience more like 1940 than 1962, when the new cathedral was consecrated – and there were 22 long years between those two events.

The cross of nails, which sits at the heart of the high altar cross, just behind Canon Kathryn, is a sign both of God’s love in times of darkness and of his hope. And behind that is the great tapestry, which speaks of Christ looking out at
us from beyond time, holding our times in his hands. Between his huge feet – right between his toes, is a human figure: a reminder that we have Christ with us even though we may not see him – putting everything else in perspective. He is before time, in time and coming to us from the end of time, offering us hope and promising his presence, which nothing can take away.

May God give us grace to endure this journey, to tread it with wisdom, and compassion for one another, and the insight to see Christ walking with us every step of the way.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.