Today, as you know, is our Patronal festival - the feast of St. Michael and all Angels’. It’s a fabulous dedication for a Cathedral, which feels so much the ‘house of God, the gate of heaven’, as Jacob says in Genesis 28, one of the readings set for today. This is a place where earth touches heaven, and heaven touches earth, a place where we connect with history, past, present and future, where we are able to become all that God has called us to be. Cathedrals take their name from the cathedra, the seat, or throne even, where a Bishop leads and teaches in their ministry - although like many Deans I might baulk at the Collins English dictionary definition of a Cathedral as “a very large and important church which has a bishop in charge of it”.

This Cathedral, though, is different. Coventry Cathedral is much more than a building, it is a powerful symbol of God’s forgiveness and healing in a broken world. And this Sunday is also much more than simply a Patronal Festival: it has also been set for the last two years as CCN Sunday, the Sunday when our CCN partners across the world celebrate the Community of the Cross of Nails. Today, for example, in our sister church in Berlin, the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, Pastor Katrin Oxen will be speaking about Coventry, our history, and the worldwide movement of centres of peace and reconciliation which are inspired by this place and our story. And in mid November she has asked if we would be represented there in Berlin as they commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Coventry blitz.

So, you and I are part not just of a cathedral, but an international movement of peace and reconciliation. As Archbishop Justin says, this is a Cathedral that knows what it’s for, and so long as we stay true to that calling, we will never be far from the Kingdom of God. We will always be a house of God, a gate of heaven. We will always be at the heart of God’s work, which is to reconcile the world to himself.

I chose the passage from second Corinthians for our service today because it captures our calling, and holds us on track. It will be familiar to many of you, but please look at it again with me now. The passage leads us into an exploration of the ministry of reconciliation, with Paul using the word no less than five times in the space of these few verses. The root word in Greek is katallasso - it’s not a common word in scripture at all, and is only found in the writing of Paul, and then only a handful of occasions - in just four principle passages, here in 2 Corinthians, in Romans 5, Ephesians 2, and in Colossians 1. But although it’s rare, it’s incredibly important, capturing the heart of his theology about God, about Jesus Christ, about us - and how our relationship is secured.

In the New Testament katallasso does appear once in referring to reconciling human relationships, in 1 Cor 7. Otherwise it’s all about reconciliation with God, and in all four of these passages the extraordinary thing is that it is God that is doing the reconciling. Whilst we might think of ‘religious activity’ as primarily about us trying to get on the right side of God, so to speak - these passages all have God as the subject. It is God who is active in reconciliation: it is only for us to catch up with what he’s doing, to join in if you like. That then plays out in our other relationships, because if we’ve been accepted and loved by God, then we really don’t need to fight anyone else - we don’t need to. Why would we - our security is in God, who else really matters?

We can see this clearly in the passage from 2 Corinthians, which starts in v.14 with love: the “love of Christ urges us on”. This passage about salvation, and about ministry, is characterised by love. It is a love from which no-one is excluded: we are convinced that Christ died for all. I was speaking a little about this a few weeks ago, when I think I said something along the lines of, ‘what part of ‘all’ do we not understand?’ So, if Christ died for all - what else is there for us to do? Well, immediately in v.15 we find Paul saying that all need therefore to live for Christ. And the
remainder of the passage urges us to be part of this new relationship with God made possible by Jesus - to be reconciled ourselves to God (v.20) and to minister and share the message of this reconciliation with others, so that they also may be part of this new creation which God is bringing to birth. We are commissioned as ambassadors, those travelling with authority to call people into relationship.

God calls us back into right relationship with himself and one another - so what’s our part, here in Coventry? Quite simply, it’s often just to tell the story: the story of how God reached our hearts and minds here, and reached out through us to those who had been our enemies. It’s still an extraordinary story, and I never tire of telling it, because it is a way of sharing hope - hope that things can change, can be different can be better. It takes courage to step out of the prisons we make for ourselves, and our enemies, and we can find that courage by hearing of others who have managed to do the same. Across the Community of the Cross of Nails we have some 250 and more stories of hope to share with the world.

Last weekend I had the privilege of travelling to Demmin in northern Germany, about 100 miles north of Berlin. As I mentioned last week, this place experienced great tragedy and trauma in the closing days of the second world war, when the Red Army swept into the town at the same time as it was taking Berlin. The army might have passed on through on its way to the coast, but the retreating German army blew the bridges over the 3 rivers that hemmed the town in from the west. So they were held up, and ready to give themselves to the programme of rape and destruction which had marked the behaviour of both German and Russian armies throughout, and especially in the latter days of the war. Fearing the worst, and sharing in the widespread despair confronting Germany as their leader took his own life in his Berlin bunker, at least 1000 people in the town took their own lives - often with parents killing their children before following them by drowning in ponds or the wide rivers surrounding the town, by hanging themselves in the forests, often adjacent to the town cemetery, by poisoning or shooting, for the few that possessed guns and bullets.

It was a shame that hung over the town for decades, casting a long shadow of silence, accompanied by the shame of those babies born of the violence again women. It became increasingly impossible to talk about it, until relatively recently. The story was told in a book, Promise me you’ll shoot yourself, by Florian Huber, translated into English in 2019 - I was able to read it as I travelled there. Then a Lutheran pastor, Karsten Wolkenhauer, encouraged members of the church and community to begin to own the story, and to allow the healing power of sharing and prayer to begin to play a part. Karsten has now moved on, but asked if the church might join the Community of the Cross of Nails, so that the cross might be a tangible sign of the work already done, and still remaining to do, in the healing of the wounds of history. It was unbearably moving to carry that cross, blest and sent from Coventry, into the church in Demmin last Sunday. It’s still a hard place to be - to stand by the river where so many died, in the cemetery where they are buried, by the woods where many also took their lives. But the intersection of the Coventry story and the Demmin story is the place where Christ meets us in that place of devastating loss, encouraging us to face it with both honesty and hope, knowing that only as we recognise where we are on the road towards healing can we begin to move forward from the honesty of loss towards the hope of healing.

This is our story, a story of Christ meeting us in loss and leading us through hope to healing, here in this extraordinary and beautiful building, which would not be here had we not suffered loss ourselves. This is a story of the power of God made present in human weakness, leading us deeper into his love for all humankind, inviting us to learn to live with difference, to celebrate diversity, and to join with others in building a culture of peace. My friends, this is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven, which we are privileged to inhabit, to enjoy and to care for, not just for our own sakes, but the sake of the world.

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. Eph 3. 20,21