**A Sermon preached by Christopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry,**

**on the occasion of the Installation of**

**Mary Gregory as Canon for Arts and Reconciliation**

**on 12th March 2022**

**in Coventry Cathedral**

Readings: Song of Songs 3.1-5 and Luke 19.1-9

**Introduction**

Our two readings are from books in the Bible that are themselves art forms. The Old Testament reading is an exquisite passage from a long amd beautiful poem we call the Song of Songs. The second reading is from perhaps the finest and most elegant narrative writer found in the New Testament, St Luke. Both touch the heart and move the soul.

These two passages have much to say about reconciliation as well, and the relationship between art and reconciliation, and that is because they both have much to tell us about *the soul*.

**The soul and Song of Song**

These are deeply Hebrew, Jewish texts. So when I talk about the soul I want to do in a way that would make sense to the way they thought, and to the way Jesus thought, and so to they way God would have us imagine the soul – not as some sort of spiritual principle opposed to the body and material life but rather:

* as the deep centre of self-identity,
* as the transmitter of personality,
* as the receptor of truest reality.

‘I sought him whom my soul loves’, says the woman in Song of Songs, ‘I sought him but found him not’. Her soul desires love. Her soul has sensed that love is there to be found. Her soul stretches out in search of love. Her soul speaks love through her body.

Song of Songs is a deeply human love poem that tells of the passionate love between two lovers: the bride and her beloved; and at times it’s very physical. It’s no wonder, though, that it’s been seen as a picture of our relationship with God, both as individuals and as a people. It’s yearning for beauty, for truth, for faithfulness; it’s longing to be held safely, tenderly cared for, strongly embraced: it’s desire for love has made it a picture of the deepest centre of human self-identity – the desire for love.

**Zacchaeus’ soul**

‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’, say the crowd of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a collaborator with the occupiers. He was a swindler of his own people. He was greedy and unjust. His soul had been distorted by his sin. His sin had disrupted his relationships with those around him and deprived him of peace with God. His soul was not at rest.

And yet as damaged as was his own soul, he knew there was a deeper self in him that others could not see, so obscured it had become. He sensed that there was a truer reality passing by his door than he had known before. He climbed a tree so that he could see the one who ‘was going to pass that way’. And Jesus looked up and saw him and called him by name, saying, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today’.

Zacchaeus’ soul was restored by Jesus’ love. His relationships were reconciled. He found his deep self that yearned to be good. He found his place among the children of Abraham. ‘Today salvation has come to his house’, said Jesus. Zacchaeus’ soul was put right by love and his soul made fit to relate well to others and act justly with them.

‘I found him whom my soul loves’, sang the lover in Song of Songs, and Zacchaeus too, ‘I held him, and would not let him go, until I brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me’.

**C Art, reconciliation and the soul**

The Arts in their many forms seek to find highest reality and to make it seen, heard, touched, felt. They stretch out to set forth truth. They reach for beauty that somehow they may make it seen and heard and touched, or perhaps just sensed.

They yearn for love and tell in paint, sound and light, in stone, wood and metal the distortions to the human soul and the disruptions in our relationships caused by loss and lack of love.

It was those disruptions in human relationships that caused this new Cathedral of Coventry to be built and for it to be populated with forms of visual art that open the gates of heaven on earth and carry us God. None more so, perhaps, than Sutherland’s tapestry, that draws us towards the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ: the beautiful face of Christ, the kind and true face, the accepting face that smiles upon us. The face that looks on us and our distorted souls, and loves us. The face of love

**Psalmist, Simeon, Mary**

‘Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us’, said the psalmist in this evening’s psalm. And as God does so, gladness comes to his heart: ‘I can rest’, he says, ‘and lay my head down in peace, for I dwell in safety’. The light of God’s love has restored his soul and reconciled him to human life and society.

Old Simeon too, as we heard in the Nunc Dimittis, found that peace, when he saw the light of God’s reality coming to the world, carried in the arms of Mary and Joseph as they presented their child to him. ‘For mine eyes have the seen the salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people’.

And as we heard in the Magnificat, when Mary herself heard that this salvation was coming to earth and coming to birth in her, her soul ‘magnified the Lord, her spirit rejoice in God her saviour, who had regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden’, and loved her with an immensity of grace upon grace.

**Our Mary**

And now a word to the Mary who has come among us, the Mary soon to be installed as our first Canon for Arts and Reconciliation. There will be so many things, Mary, you could do as the months unfold and you will need great wisdom from the Lord and good support from those around you to discern where you will focus your time and energies.

I suspect though, that the needful thing to which you are called – is to help us to see that at the heart of human art is the desire for the divine and for the love for God that is beyond our imagining. And that that this love so restores the soul that it reconciles all our relationships and puts right what we have damaged in others and what they have damaged in us.

Charles Hamilton Sorley put it well, as we shall hear in the anthem that follows. The artist and those whom their work touches, ‘stand with parted lips and outstretched arms and listening ears’. Let them know, let us know that God comes close to them in Jesus Christ, calls us by name and says, ‘I must stay at your house today: hurry and open the *sanctuary of your soul*, for today salvation can come to your house, for you too are child of Abraham’.

And pray for us Mary, that when the one ‘whom our soul loves’ passes by, we would ‘hold him, and ot let him go, until we bring him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber that conceived us’.