Bishops in the Church of England, in my experience, each have their own catch-phrases, reflections of their particular interests and obsessions, and of the projects that they hope to advance through their episcopal ministry. They deploy these phrases as conversational (or indeed homiletic) gambits whenever they encounter people, as a way of engaging and challenging them to new ways of thinking. Bishop Humphrey Southern, now our Dean’s successor as Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, used when bishop of Repton, to go round to churches in his diocese asking congregations: what difference does it make to have your church here, for this act of worship to have happened? Not, what difference would it make to you as individuals (that’s too obvious); but what difference does it make to your own communities, to the particular locality in which your church is situated, to the range of people living and working there, that you are gathered in this place, worshipping God in this way?

In a Cathedral like this, the Chapter – the Dean and Canons – probably ought to ask themselves that question regularly. I suspect that I speak for all of us when I confess that we might often struggle to come up with a very impressive reply. But for a gathered congregation like this morning’s, one that encompasses such a diversity of people, including not only several regular worshippers, but also many of you who have travelled a long way to share worship with us for the first, and quite possibly the only time, the question might be posed slightly differently: what brought you to this church today (this Cathedral church, rather than any of the other churches in the town centre, all of which are offering acts of worship at around this time on a Sunday morning)?

Did you come for the music; or to pray and reflect on the word of God, as the scriptures were opened and read; or to hear a great sermon (I hope you will not be too disappointed? You could, of course, have enjoyed scripture, preaching, and prayer at our earlier service of Matins. So did you come to participate in the act of corporate thanksgiving that lies at the heart of this service: the eucharist?

While you ponder your own motives, let me pose a different question, one that was a favourite of the last bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard. Whenever he met me, he used to ask, ‘What have you done today, Sarah, for the bringing in of the kingdom?’ Over time I got better at finding him a response beyond that of ‘I thought it was God himself, who will bring in the kingdom’. But I was reminded of my embarrassing failure to say anything at all the first time he asked, when I saw today’s gospel reading. That collection of seemingly disjointed parables has an obvious unity when we recognise that they each relate to the kingdom. We heard a catalogue of examples beginning each time with the same words – ‘the kingdom of heaven is like …’: a mustard seed; yeast mixed in flour; a hidden treasure; a fine
pearl; a large catch of fish. At the end Jesus brought them all together by asking the disciples if they had understood what he had been saying. I rather suspect that in answering, ‘Yes’, they actually meant, ‘No, not really, but we hope you’re about to explain’, in which they were to prove disappointed.

For Jesus’ final parable told them, not what the kingdom is like, but what a scribe who has been trained for the kingdom is like. In this, I think that Jesus meant them to hear not a reference to the highly trained temple scribes who so often, with the Pharisees, had attracted his criticism, but an allusion to those individuals in a congregation who are students of scripture (both old and new). They have the great privilege of passing on and explaining the treasures of Jesus’ teaching, including his teaching through parables, to the people of God.

Yet, I think we can hear Jesus’ words as encompassing not only biblical scholars but also his disciples, then and now. When he spoke, he referred to that close-knit body of those who had known him in life, and had the benefit of experiencing his explanations and interpretations at first hand. Their role would be, after Jesus’ Ascension, to pass on their understanding to others. But we should hear his words as meant for us, too. A scribe trained for the kingdom is one who takes these stories of Jesus’ out of the treasure-house of her own mind, and uses them to plant small ideas in the minds of others; ideas that will grow into food rich enough to feed the whole world. Someone who can explain the good news of the gospel in order to demonstrate that there are treasures so precious they would be worth selling everything we have to own them. A scribe trained for the kingdom asks each of us the question that God asked Solomon in our first reading: ‘what should I give you?’ ‘What is it that you really want?’ (1 Kings 3: 5) And just as Solomon’s answer showed that he knew that he already possessed, at least in part, that for which he asked, so these stories may help us to see that through grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, we may come to receive what we most want, that which – if we but knew it – we already enjoy.

Paul explained: the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding on our behalf when we cannot pray as we ought (Rom 8: 26), and when we find ourselves unable to ask for the thing for which we yearn so deeply, namely, the love of God and a share in his kingdom, without which we feel incomplete. Yet, Paul said to the Romans, this is in fact the thing that we already enjoy. ‘Nothing – not death, nor life, … nor things present, nor things to come … nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all Creation will able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ (Rom 8: 37-9) How can we come closest to encountering that love for which we yearn, for which we pray so inadequately? We do so in the Eucharist, where bread is broken and wine poured for us both as individuals and collectively, in order that we may come together as the body of Christ and so bring the kingdom into our midst.

In the action of the Eucharist, we feel the fusion of time and space; word and sacrament together bring us, through the working of the Spirit, into the presence of Christ. Past, present and future come together simultaneously: the act of our celebration causes us to remember Calvary, to create the body of Christ, and so to look towards the coming of the kingdom. In the Eucharistic prayer, the president will remind us of the Last Supper, in saying the words of institution that Christ taught his disciples on the night before he died: this is my body; this is my blood. He – and we – will thereby create the body of Christ, not only in the bread and
the wine on the table, but in ourselves. We, the body of Christ, who celebrate this act of thanksgiving, do so together; we consume the bread and wine, which are, to us, Christ’s own body. As the priest hands each of us a wafer, he gives us the body of Christ; when he tells us to receive ‘the body of Christ’, he is telling us to take that which we already are.

As St Augustine explained in a powerful sermon on the eucharist, we need to remember St Paul’s assertion in his letter to the Corinthians that ‘they (we) are the body of Christ, member for member.’ [1 Cor. 12.27]. Augustine wrote,

If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord’s table. It is your own mystery that you are receiving. You are saying “Amen” to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. When you hear “The body of Christ”, you reply “Amen.” Be a member of Christ’s body, then, so that your “Amen” may ring true! [Augustine, Sermon 272]

I cannot speak for any of you, but my own answer to my earlier question ‘why are you here at this particular act of worship?’, is very simple. I have come to this place at this time, as I do every week, in order to participate in this Eucharistic mystery; to have the scriptures opened and bread broken for me, in order that I may renew my sense of belonging to the body of Christ. A body shared for me on this altar reinforces my belonging to the metaphorical body of which we are all part through our common participation in this sacrament. Receive what you are; receive the body of Christ. Those are the words that will sustain me through the coming week.

As I join with you in this collective act of thanksgiving and in receiving Christ’s body, I believe that I – we – are all doing our own work towards the bringing in of the kingdom. So, rather belatedly, I have answers to both those bishops whose questions I quoted at the beginning. What difference, Bishop Humphrey asks, ‘does it make to the world outside that you are engaged in this act of worship in here today’ We can now confidently reply: we have renewed our collective identity and, nourished by Christ’s body, we are ready to take his gospel out to the world around us, starting at our own gates and in our own local communities.

‘What have we done today for the bringing in of the kingdom?’ We have fulfilled our calling as scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven; we have found within ourselves treasures old and new, and have fashioned ourselves anew as Christ’s body, by receiving our own mystery from his table. His treasure, shed at such cost, brings us our redemption. Our corporate actions in remembering his sacrifice, have served to bring his kingdom among us. May we all carry that confidence with us through the week ahead, as we live out our calling to be scribes trained for the kingdom by sharing the light of Christ’s countenance and the good news of his redeeming grace to all those whom we will encounter this day, and on each of the days to come.

AMEN