There is only one way to begin this morning. And that is with a thank you. A huge thank you to those of you who over the past year have been so kind, caring and supportive towards us. In the course of this ordeal - which at times has felt gruelling - I can only say that we have felt sustained by prayer and love like never before. It has been palpable and persistent. And only occasionally patchy! This care has also been material. I have at home over 2,500 messages, cards and letters of kind support from all over the world, representing not just friendships, but also deep connections with the wider Anglican Communion, universities at home and abroad, and people and places near and far. There have been phone calls, flowers, the odd meal, many cakes, and reassuring hugs.

‘Thank you’ does not even begin to express our gratitude. It never can. Yet in all this I think this care and support bears testimony to some of the deep truths that we all hold dear in common: that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome. That love, hope, faith and charity are hard to extinguish, and endure. And in all this, I have been mindful - as has Emma - of our thick connection with the congregations of the cathedral, many colleagues, and the hundreds of staff and volunteers who work here, and students and alumni too. You have always been in our prayers, even during this enforced absence that I was made to bear.

In one of the darker moments this last year, when all seemed bleak, Emma wrote this poem. She’s been writing very fine perfectly publishable poetry for a few years now, since the loss of Chaz, her younger brother. This one is called “Another Economy”:

I have found that there is a different economy
Whose currency is
Love and kindness
Faithfulness and prayer
Generosity and integrity.
When these virtues are practiced
Deposits are made and investments accrued.
So, when the world turns harsh
And desolation beckons,
I find I am rich.
And I can draw on this wealth
Providing me with
Friendship and kindness
Prayers and blessings
Fortitude and strength.

So, thank you. And I will be repeating these words often over the coming months. I mean them. We mean them. We are forever in your debt.

That said, there is a second way to begin this morning’s sermon, and with some words that will be familiar: “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted.” I promise you that this is the only reference to the Second World War in this sermon, as we remember the 80th anniversary of its outbreak this week. But it is a year to the day since I last preached here, but the phrase “as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted” is more apposite than you might suppose. As Europe teetered perilously on the edge of cataclysmic conflict, BBC television was still in its infancy. The service could not continue in war time – its transmitter at Alexandra Palace would have been a powerful beacon for enemy planes. So, with only days to go until the declaration of war, the television signal was cut off on 1 September 1939 halfway through a Mickey Mouse’s Gala Premiere. It would only resume in 1946, picking up at the same point in the cartoon but only after the announcer had witheringly intoned: “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted.”

The story is irresistible, and, as such, has become part of the BBC’s unofficial history. Unfortunately, as well as being a great story, it is also a complete fabrication. The first words uttered on 7 June 1946 were “Good afternoon everybody. How are you? Do you remember me, Jasmine Bligh?” Jasmine Bligh was one of the original three BBC announcers from their pre-war service. It is true that they then played the same Micky Mouse cartoon from 1 September 1939, but they were sensible enough to realise that seven years and a world war would test people’s memory, and so started it from the beginning.
Like Jasmine Bligh, I pick up where I left off last year. I spoke about prophecy in September 2018, and our readings this morning are about Nineveh and Laodicea, and one angry Old Testament prophet, marginalised and sulky (Jonah); and one angry exiled New Testament prophet (St. John the Divine with his revelations). It is not usual to pair Nineveh and Laodicea. Different cities, different countries; different times and places. So, why does the lectionary bring them together this morning? I am reminded of the sociologist Harvey Cox, and one of his early books which was a sociological treatise on sin, called *On Not Leaving it to the Snake*. Cox says that the first sin is something we are all quite good at: indifference. Not paying attention. Looking away from corruption, evil and injustice - pretending that we have not seen it. Or, that we did not notice, so just shrug it off.

The message to Laodicea, as to Nineveh, is one of judgement and a call to repentance. Both cities lived in their own comfort zones. Both were indifferent to what was going on around them. They were tepid on justice, compassion, the needs of the poor, and the wider world. Deep down they knew what their responsibilities were. But they chose to look away. Where there is indifference, sin reigns.

It is sometimes common to play with the hot-cold-lukewarm metaphor, and assume it is all about the Church of England. A book I will never write might focus on the climatology of churches - their ideal inner spiritual weather. Some like it hot: like Pentecostals. Some like it cold: like Calvinists. English Anglicans are mostly in the middle, and they like their spirituality and worship like our proverbial weather: sunny intervals, the odd cloud, occasional showers. The outlook, mild. We love mildness. Matins is its finest expression.

But there are potential problems with tepid polity. It can be emotionally evasive. And the challenging thing about our readings this morning is their underlying emotional timbre - the anger at indifference. And here I want to say something good about anger. Anger can be righteous. Anger can be an expression of love. It can show we really care; that some things matter; that our passions are valid expressions of love.

The philosopher John Caputo asks an interesting temperature-weather-related question: ‘How do the faithful convey the mood of God?’ Robert Runcie used to say that the essence of Anglicanism was one of ‘passionate coolness’. But note the combination - passionate and cool. The traditional view on Nineveh and Laodicea was that they were indifferent. In the case of the Laodicene church, they were being criticized for their
neutrality or lack of zeal (hence “lukewarm”). One problem with this is that Christ’s desire that they be either “cold or hot” implies that both extremes were positive. The traditional view saw “cold” as a negative, the idea apparently being that Jesus either wants the readers to be either zealous (“hot”) for him or completely uncommitted (“cold”), but not middle-of-the-road. A middle-of-the-road stance was thought to be a kind of insipid, tepid Christianity.

But more contemporary interpretations have suggested that this metaphor has been drawn from the water supply of the city, which was lukewarm, in contrast to the hot springs at nearby Hierapolis and the cold, pure waters of Colossae. Recent archaeology shows Laodicea had aqueducts that probably carried water from hot mineral springs some five miles south, and nearby Colossae - both of which would have become tepid before entering the city. The image of the Laodicean aqueduct seems to suggest not that ”hot” is good and ”cold” is bad, both are useful. But lukewarm water is often emetic - that is, untreated, is potentially harmful, for lukewarm water carries disease and bacteria, causing vomiting, eye infections and other health problems.

Laodicea knew this, and this is the point of the lukewarm or tepid metaphor. The clue comes in the charge list by St. John citing the city as ”Poor, blind, and naked” (3:17–18). The words refer to the Laodiceans misplaced over-confidence in their spiritual wealth; they are unable to recognize their bankruptcy. And the image may also be drawing on the perceived worldly wealth of the city. The city was a place of great finance and banking, and for wool - they made clothes.

In 60 AD the city was hit by a major earthquake. The city refused handouts from the Roman Empire. Laodicea saw itself as self-sufficient - a cut above those around it. They could afford to be. They had money, banking a clothing industry and a medical school. But strip these things away, and they would become poor, blind and naked.

Over the course of this year, I have often had course to reflect on what matters. I have carried in my pocket one tangible sign of this. Here it is: a hazelnut. It is a reminder of those words from Julian of Norwich. She wrote:

“And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might
suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.”

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first that God made it. The second that God loves it. The third, that God keeps it.”

In the days ahead, as we face many challenges in our country, here, and in the wider church, remember what I said at the beginning. Hold fast to God and to one another, and God will keep you. God, who is faithful, will not let you fall.