I wonder if you know what the most common message from God is in the Bible. The great commandment may be love but the most common divine instruction which we heard again in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah is Al-Tiru – ‘Do not be afraid’; “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not!” (Is. 35:4).

Over a hundred times in Scripture the heart of a revelation of God, the heart of a theophany is Al-tirah / Mē phobou, “Do not be afraid”; from the Old Testament message to the patriarchs and prophets, to the angel’s annunciation to Mary. At the heart of the calling to discipleship is, “Do not be afraid”; from Jesus’ first words to Peter by the sea of Galilee, “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people” (Luke 5:10); to his farewell discourse at the Last Supper, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

But this is no simple cry of “Don’t worry, be happy!” or call to detach ourselves from the realities of daily life and suffering. In our Old Testament reading today, the context is even worse than our current fears of Brexit, climate-change and knife crime. As the previous chapter (Is. 34) would have told us – Israel is in exile; terror, destruction, suffering reign; all the nations have been given over to slaughter; there is the stench of corpses, mountains flowing with blood, a day of vengeance, the establishment of the place that is called “No Kingdom”, unfit for human habitation and abandoned to the jackals, hyenas and demons. Saying “Don’t worry, be happy” in that sort of context would be ridiculous, pastorally and theologically, but of course that’s not what Isaiah is told to say.

Rather there is a new hope – lines that I always hear to the tune of that great SS Wesley anthem “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them” “the desert shall rejoice and blossom as a rose” (Is. 35:1) – but it’s not just that everything will turn out
okay but rather that God is coming in to the midst and he’s taking sides. “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.” (Is. 35:4) There’s a radical judgement going on in his loving kindness. So we need to look more closely – who’s the message for?

The fearful or literally the hasty of heart; those with weak hands, those with feeble knees – the poor and oppressed of Israel. The good news is that God is on their side and is about to intervene. He is building a highway in the desert, a way of holiness, that the unclean will not journey on, for only the redeemed will walk there (Is. 35:8–9)

As Paul puts it in our second reading, there is a radical battle between the law of sin and the law of God, between Spirit of life and that of sin and death (Rom. 7:25). Two sides at war with one another, not only in our world but in our minds and in our bodies (Rom. 7:23).

In both the exilic prophecy and Paul’s reflections on the incarnation, we see that God is a God who takes sides – the side of the poor, the side of the outcast, the side of the marginalised and the disregarded. The Christian calling is not to stand aloof, protected on the sidelines, uninvolved in the difficulties of the world and immune to their pain; rather we are to follow the example of God. Coming into the mess of human life, temptation and suffering – “sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3).

Every Lent, every Passiontide, we remember that God came right into the midst of our mess; tempted as we are in every way, exposed to hurt and betrayal, to judgement and torture, and ultimately to death, even death on a cross. We may walk the way of the Cross here in this Cathedral, perhaps literally moving through the powerful ‘Stopping Places’, designed by Mary Flitcroft, at our Stations of the Cross services on Tuesday lunchtime or Wednesday evening; but where do we stand spiritually? Are we really “walking not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4)? Are we really on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the orphan and the widow? Are our hearts truly with the suffering of Syria, of Mozambique, of Libya; with the weak hands of Oxford and the feeble knees of Christ Church? Or does our very religion sometimes risk separating us from those whom God truly loves, as Jesus so often told the Pharisees theirs did?

The cry of Al-Tiru – “Be strong, fear not!” is not a call to complacency, nor some simplistic ‘there-there, everything’s fine’. There is beauty in the prophecy of the new
creation, the desert blossoming like a rose. But it is also a warning that the Kingdom is near; the Lord is at hand; and we have an urgent choice. Creation will be healed, the humble will be raised, the hungry will be fed, the slaves will be freed. But will any of us be people who share in peace with them? Will the day of the Lord lift us up or cast us down?

Let us pause in our Lenten journeys, each take a good hard look at our lives and choose with whom we stand. For that is the point of Lenten fasting and disciplines, not to deny what gives us life and pleasure but to remember where we stand and who we stand with. A moment of hunger not for the sake of a diet, or belief that chocolate or sweets are bad for us but rather to re-orientate ourselves towards God and his Spirit, to stand in solidarity with the crucified Christ and those whom he loves and whom he redeems. That we too may “enter Zion with singing” and that “everlasting joy may crown our heads” (Is. 35:10).