One of the great dilemmas in Christian life and belief is working out what God expects of us, and knowing what we can expect of God. It’s the core question in living out our Christian lives. If, like me, you long to live your life in a way that makes a difference in the world, and – if you are part of the life of the Cathedral - to be part of a Cathedral that makes a difference in the world, you are going to want to know how much depends on you, and how much depends on God. Well, the answer – to put it simply, and in case you settle yourself for a nap as soon as the sermon starts – is that we can expect everything of God, and he can expect everything of us ... and if you put those two things together, then the world changes.

Over this week and next, we will be looking at our vision and resources in the Cathedral. It’s a Harvest sort of theme, in which we are grateful for everything that God has given us, and we dedicate ourselves, our needs and our resources, to him for the coming year. There is so much to be grateful for in this place – our story, our place in the world and the history of God changing lives through his ministry here, our incredible building, and amazing art treasures. We are grateful for one another, the rich variety of lives and experiences that make up our various cathedral communities. We are grateful perhaps above all for the vision of Provost Howard which led from the rubble of the ruined cathedral to the vision for building this new one in which we meet today. I heard only a few weeks ago how he had celebrated communion in the midst of the ruins at five o’clock in the morning after the blitz – a prayer and declaration of hope, or forgiveness, of future.

We have inherited that vision, that ministry, and we are responsible for it – but it’s a big responsibility. Too big, in honesty, to be achieved simply by human effort alone. To throw ourselves against the task is like throwing ourselves against one of the walls of the cathedral – bruising, exhausting, ineffective. The challenges are simply too great – we can’t do it. It’s like being entrusted with a vineyard, as will probably have occurred to you, if you were listening to the Gospel reading – a vineyard that is there to produce fruit for the Kingdoms, but like some of our back gardens can seem too much to manage.

I’m really hoping that you haven’t closed down on yourself in despair, and stopped listening. If the person next to you looks as if they have done that, please give them a sharp dig in the ribs. The point is, that this sense of not being able to achieve what needs to be done by our own efforts is a repeating theme in the story of faith – in truth, it’s the big story of faith. And it’s a theme to which St. Paul constantly returns. His personal story is, quite clearly, the story of someone who threw his whole life into getting it right for God, and spectacularly failed. Discovering that and accepting it was, however, the way of opening a door in this wall he found around him, that imprisoned him in failure - a door that he hadn’t even seen. He describes this over and over again in his letters – and does so in today’s reading from Philippians.

Starting with his ethnic and religious pedigree, he continues to recount his zeal for God, but then goes on to recall how he needed to accept that none of that really counted for anything apart from discovering God’s power of salvation in Jesus Christ. I needed to accept, he says, that nothing I could do or had done was going to achieve the result in my life, and my faith, that I longed for – I had to let it all go, and put my trust entirely in God’s work through the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

And so that’s what he did – he laid aside everything that he had earned by his own efforts, and in complete humility abandoned himself to the mercy of God. And then he sat back, and relaxed, because it was time for God to take over. Wrong ... he put his trust completely in God’s grace and mercy, and then started over, living his life in a grateful
and loving response to God’s grace, working with every power within him to join with what God was doing (instead of working with every power to persuade God to join what he, Paul, was doing).

The letter to the Philippians has the sublime hymn in the middle, which describes how Jesus himself laid the pattern for the way of living I’ve just described in Paul. How Jesus laid aside everything, humbled himself, identified so much with the poor and suffering of the world that he died under the weight of it all, but was then born up in the grace and mercy and power of God to new life. But before and after that are passages which speak always of ‘pressing on’. ‘I am confident of this,’ says Paul in chapter 1 verse 6, ‘that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ’. And in verse 9: ‘And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more, with knowledge and insight to help you determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.’

He speaks of ‘striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel’ (1.27), and here in today’s passage of how he himself presses on, ‘forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, pressing on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’. So, despite putting his whole trust in God for salvation, this is not a life of leisure for Paul, or those whom God addresses through his words today. When I arrived in the cathedral nearly two years ago, I found myself speaking of working ‘hand in hand in hand’, hand in hand with each other, hand in hand with God – we are called to strive together in partnership with each other and with God.

So what is the heavenly call of God upon us, towards which we press, for which we strive here in the cathedral? Like all calls, it needs to be tested, prayed into, and then lived out with all the prayer, and all the resources God has given to us. (When I was a DDO ...) There are no real surprises here: our call is to be used in God’s ministry of reconciliation, in reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ – and in proclaiming that reconciliation. It’s a call which resonates around the world, and is needed today as much – perhaps more – than ever. It’s an awesome privilege – and it demands all the resources of God, and all the resources we can put to it ourselves. God gives us the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit to enable us to success – but we also have to play our part.

In the last few months, the character of our life here has come to be crystalized under four headings – Welcome, Worship, Reconciliation – and because we can’t deliver these three on goodwill alone – Resources. Tomorrow morning, I am looking forward to going to gather with our new team of Canons - Kathryn, David, Sarah and now Stephen – to spend a day in prayer and planning around these four headings. Rather neatly, each is responsible for a lead in one area – Kathryn, as Canon Pastor, in Welcome; David, as Canon Precentor, in Worship; Sarah, as Canon for Reconciliation Ministry, in Reconciliation; and Stephen, as Canon Treasurer, in Resources. But of course, they can’t achieve anything on their own. Their role is to help us all fulfill all our callings in these four areas – we should all be welcoming (let’s fill up the coffee rota), all worshipping (do come to morning and evening prayer during the week), all reconciling (let’s get on with each other a bit better) – and all playing our part in securing the resources that God needs to drive his work forward here.

We are called, I believe, to be a Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. I might rephrase that slightly: using our history and our buildings, we aim to be a sustainable and effective centre for reconciliation locally and regionally, nationally and internationally. And we will do this by making welcome, worship, reconciliation the heart of our life together – and to do that, we need also to prioritise resources.

When I was a Diocesan Director of Ordinands, talking to people who were wondering what God was calling them to do with their lives, and particularly if he was calling them to be vicars, we had a simple test, which can be used for any vocation. Was their sense of call realistic, was it informed, and was it obedient? Was it realistic – given who they were, their gifts and their situation, was the idea of their being a vicar actually realistic. Is our sense of calling to be a Centre for Reconciliation, making a real difference locally and internationally, realistic? Well yes – the recent involvement at the Ricoh demonstrates that we can make a difference. We have a powerful building and story, some extraordinary staff and networks, and we can use them, and our standing in the local and international community
to bring people together. Is our calling informed – do we know enough about the part that we believe God is calling us to play in the world? Yes and no – we know enough to take us the next step – the new partnership with the Archbishop of Canterbury is still in its early days, with new staff members working from St. Michael’s House. We don’t know just what this will mean, but we have enough of an idea to get us started. And is our sense of call obedient – in other words, is it just our own wishful thinking, or is it actually an obedient response to the calling of God? Well, this is tested through prayer, and openness to God, and proved through genuine sacrifice, of the complete commitment of lives and resources offered to God for him to use.

At the moment, we don’t have the resources we need to do the work we believe God is calling us to do. WE don’t have enough to care for our buildings, and we don’t have enough to support the ministry – it’s not an impossible gap, but it’s a gap. Now, that could mean that we are wrong about what we think God is calling us to do. Or it could mean that we have yet to dig sufficiently deep into our resources to play the part God expects us to play, in order for him to play that part we expect him to play.

I’m going to be looking again over the next week or two at what I can offer to God for the work he is doing here – and I would like to ask you to do the same. If you’re a visitor here today, please feel to participate – but you may also feel free to take these principles and apply them to your own situation! Next week we will continue to look at how we put our principles of welcome, worship and reconciliation first, without forgetting resources, but not allowing ourselves to be driven by them – by allowing ourselves to be driven by the challenge of what we should we doing, not by raising the resources to do it.

“Now to God 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.”