This week the Finance Director and I have been working on a new bank mandate. David Oglethorpe and I have been sorting out who should have the authority to sign for the Cathedral and who therefore the bank can rely on when it pays out money or honours cheques. I can’t say it’s the most exciting way to spend your time, but it’s very important.

While we were getting things straight, I told David about a case I mediated, in which its importance was shown. It concerned a high flying investment banker and his secretary in Hong Kong. The investment banker, rich beyond most of our dreams, had asked his secretary to handle all his private finances – insurances, school fees, bills and so on. She effectively did all that for him. So effectively that she siphoned off nearly £2m for her own purposes. Our high flier didn’t notice – and why would he, since his secretary dealt with his bank statements. ‘Leave that to me’. One day a manager rang the banker to ask if he was happy that his secretary had been drawing out thousands of pounds in cash. She’d been going to the branch counter and taking out the money. Happy? He was first perplexed then furious – particularly when his fellow directors of the Bank blamed him for not checking his statement, rather than themselves for their own failure. The day for the mediation came. The bank’s directors flew over from Hong Kong. They were resolute in their defiance – in their conviction that their colleague was responsible and that they weren’t. But privately I said to them – Where was your mandate? Where was your authority to pay money out to the secretary? There was no mandate. And we swiftly moved to settle on terms that saw the banker recover a very high proportion of his money back – and unwelcome publicity on both sides was avoided.

The new mandate that Jesus gives is the substance of our second reading from the gospel of John. The new mandate – the new command or commission or charge - is given by Jesus under the image of the vine. ‘I am the vine, you are the branches’.

A few years ago I did some teaching to ordinands and at the end of the two year period of teaching, they gave me this lovely icon. It is the image of Jesus as the vine, and the disciples are the branches of the vine. Here they are inseparable from Jesus. Jesus is the whole vine, and his disciples are branches of it. As you know, the vine is the symbol of Israel. It figured on the coinage. So when Jesus says, I am the vine, he is claiming to be the new Israel, and when he tells the disciples that they are the branches of the vine, he is saying that they and he are the new Israel, the new people of God. Linked together inseparably. It is one way of viewing being in Christ. And from this image of the vine - the new Israel, the new people of God - the new mandate of Jesus rings out.

It has 3 parts. It is a mandate to be loving. A mandate to bear fruit. And a mandate to be joyful. Loving, fruitful, joyful – we might think that here is almost the essence of the Christian life. Let’s look at each in turn.

Love one another

I remember hearing the great Donald Coggan, one of the greatest preachers I have ever heard, preach on the Christian concept of love. Quoting Bishop Stephen Neill, he said that ‘Love is the set of the will for the eternal welfare of another’. It is primarily volitional – it has primarily to do with the will. So it means we have to love people we may not ordinarily like. That difficult colleague, who is so unaware of your situation. That neighbour who is practising his drums at all hours of the day and night. That UKIP supporter who wilfully misreads our predicament. We have to love them.

It is not for nothing that the greatest commandments are about love – and that all the law and the prophets depend on it. It is the number one task. Love another.

Bear fruit

Jesus says, secondly, bear fruit. You are branches of the vine. Cultivate the grapes.
Yesterday I spent some time in my garden. I must say it’s really great having Saturdays off (for the first time in 7 years). It’s what everyone else does. Time in the garden yesterday meant cutting back to expose the plants and the spaces – and pruning the roses, which seems so brutal, is of course an essential task to produce good growth in the spring and flowers in the summer.

What would bearing fruit for you look like? Perhaps it might mean the opportunity to do less. To cut back on the many things you do, so as to make for a greater simplicity in your life. I think it was Leonardo da Vinci who said that ‘Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication’. Cut back and do it better. It’s one way in which we may find ourselves more fruitful.

Be joyful

And thirdly, says Jesus, be joyful. It is hard on this Remembrance Sunday, with its undertow of sorrow for loss, suffering, pain, death – it is hard to speak of joy; and we won’t try to trump or relativise the deep grief and pain by an urging to joy. We won’t say, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah but…!’ What we will say is that in the depths of our heartache and pain, we may find the God whose joy is our strength. We may go deeper into God and thus deeper into joy… and bit by bit it may free us to make a list of our blessings…to ask, What have I to be thankful for, what have I to rejoice over?

The new mandate that Jesus gives – to love without reservation (and without selectivity) to bear fruit by concentrating on what matters and cutting out what doesn’t, and to be joyful, to drink deep from the spirit of the water of life – is a charge that we may be enthusiastic to sign up for. ‘Yes I’m up for that, it makes sense to me.’ But then we say… Am I up to it? Have I the inner resources, the courage, the confidence?

Two points on this to finish with.

Gideon, whom we heard about in the first lesson didn’t think he was up to it. What me? he said to the Angel of God. ‘I’m from the smallest clan in the tribe of Manasseh and I’m the least important person in my whole family’. And the angel of God says ‘I shall be with you’ And he gives Gideon the signs that lead to victory over the whole host of Midian. Jesus says to his disciples- so as to give them confidence – ‘I chose you’. We need to hear those words ourselves. Jesus says to us: ‘I chose you’ That should increase our confidence, should it not?

And finally a practical recommendation. Driving to and from Coventry to Warwick this week I have been listening to a CD of Taize chants. Singing along with them. The repetition of these biblical words and chants is both energising and stilling. The words and the music continue sounding in you long after you’ve stopped singing them. It is as if they are praying themselves in you. It is like the repetition of the Jesus prayer – wonderfully stilling and a builder of confidence. Get hold of a CD of Taize chants.

The plea - O Lord hear my Prayer turns into the song of praise and joy: Laudate omnes gentes, Laudate Dominum. Praise the Lord O ye people, Praise the Lord our God.

Amen and Amen.