Sometimes a cathedral can feel like a giant hamster wheel. It takes an awful lot of us to get the wheel moving, and an awful lot of us to keep it moving! Today is a day when we want to say thank-you to the hamsters!

When I arrived in the cathedral almost exactly two years ago, I happened on a phrase which I still pull out from time to time – hand in hand with one another, and hand in hand with God. I still like it – it expresses perfectly how I believe ministry should be – it’s open, and supportive, and vital for our life together. It’s no surprise that good structures are built around triangles, because they are solid, and strong, and the building of a church, or a cathedral’s ministry is the same – it needs to be built solid and strong, and so it depends on a triangle of relationships between one person and another, and each of those persons and God.

In our readings today we heard of the Baptism of Christ – it’s a principal, but somewhat surprising feast in the Church’s year. Why on earth did Jesus need to be baptized? On Monday this week I stood in front of one of my favourite paintings, Pierro de la Francesca’s Baptism of Christ. I had walked purposely into the Sainsbury wing of the National Gallery to revisit it after a meeting round the corner, and hunted slightly before locating it at the end of a familiar line of rooms, framed by the architecture. It’s a beautiful scene, with Christ in the middle looking serene, his hands held in an attitude of prayer, whilst John slightly awkwardly leans in from the side to pour a trickle of water over his head, from the very sparse River Jordan at his feet. Behind him, the next candidate is taking off his shirt, whilst to the left of the picture stand a somewhat surprised, slightly disengaged group of three angels, apparently bemused by the whole thing. As well they might be – if baptism is primarily about the washing away of sin, what is the Christ doing, standing in the river?

Some theological writers have seized on this event to explain the challenges of the incarnation – seeing it as where the simply human Jesus, born (or at least conceived) out of wedlock, became the divine Christ. Others see it as almost irrelevant, certainly theologically unnecessary, a sort of visual aid of Christ’s submission to the Father, in order to show his followers what they too should do. Neither will do – one says almost too much about what was taking place, and the work of the Spirit in the unfolding scene, the other too little.

It’s not so much to do with the washing, as the Spirit. The dove, hovering over John’s cup of water, which is just above Jesus’ head, is not there with Jesus for the first time in his life – nor is he there for the last. The dove – which of course symbolizes the Spirit – was present in Jesus coming to birth, and has been accompanying him throughout his thirty years of life, is now prompting him into new life and ministry. The Holy Spirit is there to guide and empower Jesus for the coming three crucial years of teaching, of ministry, of service and ultimately of sacrifice – and beyond that, to be the power bursting through the tomb in the new beginning of resurrection. And the Spirit is there because the heavens have been ‘torn open’ – an unrepearable gash, through which heaven is linked to earth. What looks like a trickle here in this picture has become a torrent.

Jesus’ whole ministry was in the power of the Spirit – his whole life was an expression of the eternal work of the Spirit in bringing the Father’s purpose of salvation into physical reality in the world. It was, of course, the Spirit which gave order and therefore meaning and life to the stuff of creation. It was the Spirit who guided and empowered the people of God through the centuries before the birth of Christ. And now, it was the Spirit who brought into being in the world the culmination of God’s great plan of salvation, through the incarnation, ministry, sacrifice and resurrection of his Son.
Now this is – as David was saying last week – the greatest story this world has ever known. But of course it’s not over, which takes us back to the hamster wheel ... or perhaps better, the flywheel as management gurus such as Jim Collins would like to say. The story of God’s work in the world in Jesus Christ is now our story – the story of this cathedral. God, as we read regularly, was in Jesus world reconciling the world to himself, and he has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. But he hasn’t left us alone in it, any more than he left Jesus alone in his work as Messiah. This is the significance of this feast of the Baptism of Jesus – it’s a Trinitarian feast. The meaning of the word Messiah is ‘anointed’ – the same word in Hebrew is translated ‘Christ’ in Greek, and means the one marked and equipped with the blessing of God’s Spirit as Saviour King.

Now being a volunteer in a place like a cathedral is hard work. I might say it’s thankless – I hope that’s not the case, but sometimes I’m sure it feels like it. But the vital thing to note is that it’s not just our work. It’s actually God’s, and we are invited to take our place within it, in this wonderful triangular, hand in hand in hand structure – which is solid, and sustainable, because it depends not only on our commitment to God, but God’s commitment to us. His choice of us, and his directing and equipping of us through his Spirit.

The Spirit is an empowering, directing Spirit – both those are vital. If God just guided us, he would not be able to count on us doing what we needed to do. If he just empowered us, who knows what we would do! But the Spirit, as I like to say is the Map and the Mars bar ... and more than that, the Spirit is the elastic which holds us together in a wonderful network. My experience as a Christian over forty years is that when I allow God to be at work in me – in partnership with me – through the Holy Spirit, that’s when I feel I can be the person I was born to be. And I can only be that person as God meshes me into the purpose for which I was born – to make known his reconciling power. But I can’t do it alone. I can only do it as part of the wonderful network which is held by the Spirit, and is joined to all of you, doing and being what God calls you to, what you were born for!

Ken Loach in an unplanned and unexpected speech at the Cov Uni graduations introduced two quotes, “one bad, one good. Alan Sugar – Greed is Good. No it’s not. John Donne – No man is an island.” We find our meaning in the part we play in something bigger, and in relationship with others. I prepared much of what I wanted to say this morning before the events in Paris unfolded, and I have been wondering where to introduce that this morning: Paris reveals our profound need to be in relationship with one another, standing hand in hand in hand, and particularly in the work of reconciliation. And it reveals the need for those who feel they are serving God to be truly doing that – directed and empowered by him, not our own prejudice, in his work of reconciliation, in partnership with others.

That’s why we need to volunteer – because we all need to find a way to play our part. And when we do, we feel more alive, and we are more alive – and we help others be more alive too. To do something, just because we believe in what it’s part of – not for personal gain. But in doing it, we happen to come alive. But if we do it without God, we will, for sure, burn out. We pray for all our volunteers regularly – and we would like to encourage you to pray, too. Not all of our volunteers are Christians, and some may pray in different ways and different traditions – I believe God can receive that and bind it into the greater picture of his work. But I would love to invite all our volunteers to participate in our offerings of prayer and praise ... perhaps we could set aside a particular day to do that ...?

Thank you for being you, and playing the part that you play. We applaud you, and celebrate all you do – and all that you are part of – because it’s the foundation of hope for the world.