For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared to be our way of life.

Paul’s closing words in this afternoon’s lesson from Ephesians provide the perfect text for a service dedicated to the volunteers in the cathedral. Today we have been giving thanks for all of you who make this place tick – and so I need first of all to apologise to those who were here this morning, and will already have heard much of what I want to say again this afternoon.

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.

This morning we heard reading about the baptism of Christ – and the image on the front of Cathedral Matters reflects that theme, set for the whole of today. I don’t know what you remember about the baptism of Jesus – but I expect it might include washing, a dove and a voice. The washing is really the least of it – it’s a sign of being made ready for something new that God is doing. The dove is more interesting – I remember a bizarre conversation in a seminar in my theological college when we were exploring whether the image of the dove was just an idea, or something more concrete … and suddenly the descent of a concrete dove on Jesus became something altogether more alarming. And lastly, the voice: You are my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

These three give us three vital themes for volunteers. Firstly, becoming a volunteer is to be ready for something new. Whatever it means when we join a rota – and by volunteer, after some reflection, I am speaking of anyone who is on a rota which enables the cathedral to take forward its work, in a planned and structured and – I hesitate to use the word strategic – but at least ordered way - either in and around the building, or out and about in the city (and so I include our participation as a cathedral in the work of the Night Shelter, or the Christian Service Centre in Bardsley House, just as I include all those who enable our services to happen, or our welcome and interpretation to visitors, young and old, who care for our building and art treasures, assist in the reconciliation ministry, who help in the administration or governance, who ring the bells … and in so many other ways) … we are joining something new. New for us, and new for the team which we are joining. It will take us in directions we cannot predict.

And that leads us to the second theme – the gift of the Spirit. Just as Jesus exercised his ministry in partnership with the Spirit, under his guidance and empowering, so we, as partners with Jesus, are invited to do everything we do under the guidance and empowering of the Spirit. Otherwise we will surely burn out, exhausted, or else simply miss the opportunities God is placing before us. 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!
And that leads me to the third theme: It is no accident that you are here, playing your part in all that God is doing here. God has chosen you. A lovely package arrived at home yesterday for my wife, Ricarda, with several different versions of the same text, by Raymond Carver:

“And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.”

None us can be ourselves without knowing that we are loved. As we follow Jesus we are caught up in the love of the Father for his Son – caught up in the love which God has for Jesus. I hope that thought sends shivers down your spine. I know that being a volunteer can sometimes – perhaps often – feel thankless, without purpose or point, and exposing you to the disinterest or downright hostility of community and visitors alike. I’m really sorry for that. But I hope that you can draw strength from being reminded of God’s favour upon you, and that as you play your part here, you are being the person you were made to be – and enabling others to do the same.

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared to be our way of life.