Some years ago, while I was a vicar in the Earls Court area of London, I was invited to become chaplain to the Mayor of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. One of my duties was to attend civic receptions from time to time – which gave me the opportunity to meet a rich variety of the great and the good, not least from among the many foreign diplomats who were based in the Royal Borough.

The ambassador who sticks in my mind is the one whose formal uniform included a couple of ammunition belts strapped across his chest! I don’t know whether or not he had a gun to go with them – hopefully not... Rather than firing bullets, I think he would probably have had to make do with throwing them! All the same, it was somewhat unnerving.

Which brings us to the question I would like us to ponder... How about the inner uniform that we’re wearing as we come to the Cathedral this morning? In particular, is it the uniform that an ambassador for Christ is expected to wear?

Our first reading from chapter 6 of the apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians follows on from what we heard last week from chapter 5. It’s a passage which we often quote as being at the heart of what we’re about here at Coventry Cathedral. Paul tells his readers that God ‘reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God’ (2 Corinthians 5.18-20).

It’s pretty awesome as it stands – but Paul needs to say more. For, as is implied in chapter 5 and stated even more clearly here in chapter 6, the enormous privilege of being an ambassador for Christ comes with a rather hefty price-tag. The ministry of reconciliation is a costly one to undertake. Serving as a bridge between enemies who are not yet friends involves being trodden on.

But the thing is that this is no more than what we should expect. It’s all in this phrase Paul uses at the beginning of chapter 6: ‘As we work together with him...’, that is God.

It almost slips by unnoticed, doesn’t it? ‘As we work together with God’. And yet – what an extraordinary thing for Paul to be saying. The idea that God calls us into partnership with himself. That God invites us to help him fulfil his plans. That it doesn’t stop with ‘God reconciling us to himself through Christ’ but that it continues with him ‘giving us the ministry of reconciliation’. That he has ‘entrusted the message of reconciliation to us’. That he ‘is making his appeal through us’.

So – what might we expect the life of those who are working together with God to be like? What is the uniform of those who are ambassadors for Christ? Paul spells it out here in verses 3-10.

First, working together with God means coming under pressure. Although as ‘servants of God’ we might expect a cloak of divine protection to be wrapped around us at all times, Paul’s experience is that this is by no means always the case. One commentator reassures us that ‘The apostle Paul’s experience of pain in the ministry represents an
extreme case’ but then goes on to say ‘Nevertheless all faithful ministry of reconciliation will involve, to some degree at least, a measure of suffering’ (Paul Barnett). We may not collect the whole set of what Paul describes here in verse 4 and 5 – endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights and hunger – but we can expect some of them to turn up from time to time.

This is one of the main issues that lies behind the whole of this letter. Paul is having to deal with a situation in which working together with God is seen as being all about power and success. Since it’s almighty God we’re talking about, his critics were saying, how could it be anything else? The presence in our lives of anything hinting at weakness or failure must mean that we have parted company with God somewhere along the way.

To which Paul says a resounding ‘No’. Both in theory and from his personal experience, the ambassadors of Christ are clothed, not with all-conquering power and conspicuous success – but with a sense of paralysing weakness and what often looks like abject failure. These are part and parcel of what working with God is all about.

I love what someone called F R Maltby said about Christian discipleship: ‘Jesus promised his disciples three things – that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy... and in constant trouble.’ That’s it exactly!

Secondly, we see that the call to work together with God has implications for our character, for the sort of people we are becoming. Listen again to what appears here in verses 6 and 7 on Paul’s list of the qualities that are demonstrated by those who are in effective partnership with God: purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech. Working together with God is about cultivating who we are on the inside as well as taking into account what happens to us on the outside. Our inner uniform is what counts.

Thirdly, we need to have another think about power. For it’s not that power is entirely absent when it comes to working together with God – of course not. It’s just that it works rather differently from how we might expect. So Paul does include the ‘power of God’ here in verse 7. But then he immediately goes to talk about ‘the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left’. What might they be?

Well, how about what took place in the USA on Wednesday when nine people were shot dead in Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church? One of those who were killed was 70-year-old Ethel Lance. On Friday, her daughter Nadine Collier spoke to Dylann Roof in court:

“I just want everybody to know, I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again but I forgive you. And [may God] have mercy on your soul. You hurt me, you hurt a lot of people, but God forgive you, and I forgive you...” How about that as an example of working together with God?

Fourthly and finally, working together with God is about the exercise of faith. It’s about recognising the gap that so often exists between how things seem to be and how things actually are. So here in verses 8 to 10: ‘in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and see — we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything’. Working together with God is to walk by faith and not by sight, to accept a reality that we and others cannot always see.

Come to think of it, none of this should surprise us. For the God who calls us into partnership with himself is the God who has comprehensively made himself known to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Jesus who faced pressure right from the start and knew that he was born to die. The Jesus whose life was full of grace and truth. The Jesus whose decisive blow against the forces of evil came with the statement ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’. The Jesus who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding
its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. The Jesus who calls us to follow him. The Jesus who invites us to work together with him so that enemies might become friends. To the eternal praise and glory of God. Amen.