Well, here we are: we have been preaching these last two weeks about the forthcoming election, about how to vote – or the principles that apply – and how to play our part. Now the election has happened, and maybe it’s true that we have, in the memorable words my colleague David this time last week, got the government we deserve.

There will be a variety of views in the Cathedral today – although, if conversations we have had are anything to go by, not so much variety as a casual onlooker might imagine. I was told this week of an observation by a Hindu comedian, that Christianity is a left leaning religion believed in by right wing people, whereas Islam is a right leaning religion believed in by left wing people. I rather liked that, but if it’s broadly true, then this Cathedral bucks the trend – along with a lot of the Church of England. I also quite enjoyed the observation that God sent some guidance on how to vote by giving one candidate the same initials as his Son – but then the other one also shared initials with the Baby Jesus.

Whatever your political stripe, there may be a tendency to retreat from engagement with the world, either on the basis of ‘great, now they will get on and do everything that needs to be done … or alternatively, now they will wreck everything and there is nothing, or we, can do. I would like to offer you a challenge this morning, which bucks either of those attitudes and say, actually, it’s just the opposite. Now the decision about national government has been made, it’s time for each of us to step up and discover our part in making this city, this country, the Kingdom God wants.

I would like to root that appeal in our scripture readings today. Our first reading, from Isaiah, speaks to a nation – as all our Old Testament readings, through this season of Advent. It speaks of a promise, but not one which is going to see an early full fulfilment … it calls for the maintenance of hope, and the cultivation of patience.

Our gospel reading gives us for a second week, as always at this time of year, a spotlight on John the Baptist. Some of you will know that he’s a favourite of mine – my father used to say that when he was asked at the font which John I was being named for, he said ‘the Baptist’, really because that was the name of his Oxford college. Not so very radical and politically motivated, but I’ve always looked to the Baptist as my patron saint, and associated with him a little.

Today we heard read the exchange between Jesus and John, in prison. It reminds us that both John and Jesus had disciples. Who would you have chosen? (think about it later today.)

John talks about our human responsibility – being prepared, clearing the way, ready for God to work, ready for things to change – not a popular message with the political or religious establishment.

Jesus talks about what God will do I – healing the sick, making the lame walk, the deaf hear, the blind see – things only God can do.

When I asked Ricarda who she would follow, she said, ‘Jesus, because John was a bit shouty’. But sometimes we need people who are shouty, to wake us up.

The truth is, we need both: we need to make space for God to work, to call out injustice, to shock people out of their complacency. To talk about the 27,000 people who will have turned to the Coventry foodbank by the end of the year. But we also need to point to Jesus, as the one who will give us what we cannot do by ourselves. Jesus, in the gospel, helps us see the importance of both sides of that debate … this is what God is doing … this is what John was doing …
This exchange between John and disciples, relayed through their disciples, is an extraordinary insight into the way we participate with God in building his kingdom in this world which is both God’s world and ours. In the wake of an election, this is an especially poignant place to be, and a stimulation for our prayers and our action.

If you’re bothered about trying to create a unified account of the life of Jesus from the gospels, you would have some difficulty with this passage, which sounds as though John doesn’t know who Jesus is – which doesn’t quite make sense as he has recognised, and baptised him, as described in Matthew chapter 3. Maybe, though, we can understand it by seeing John, disappointed that things are not working out with Jesus as he had hoped, even predicted, experiencing significant doubts and seeking reassurance form his prison cell. In that scenario, he sends his own disciples saying, “Are you really the one who is to come … or are we to expect another?” Doubt is never far away from faith, and needs to be given space to breathe or it can undermine us, and leave us on shaky foundations when we really need them.

We can find ourselves in the same place as John – where are you, God. It’s important to be honest about those questions, but also to allow God to speak to us to lead us back into a place of hope.

And to find our own place within that hope: (as is so often) we need to be part of the answer to our own prayer. It’s not someone else’s job to bring in the Kingdom.

Are you John’s disciple, or Jesus’? And what is your vocation to bring in the kingdom, now?

Firstly, it is all of our responsibility to pray for our new government. Boris Johnson has said some remarkable things in the last 48 hours or so – about healing, about being the servant not the master. It’s is our prayer and our responsibility to help him live up to that. And those who will work with him in government, and in parliament. Get to know your new MP, if like me, you have one.

And secondly it’s our responsibility to find our own calling in the world.

In my previous work, before coming to Coventry, I was a Diocesan Director of Ordinands – a vocations officer. It was one of my favourite ever jobs (after this one, of course – really!) It was my responsibility to drive around Gloucestershire, a joy in itself, and talk to the most highly motivated, gifted, committed Christians about what God wanted them to do with their lives.

It was an immense privilege: but the task of discernment, of seeking God’s pattern for a life, is not restricted to those thinking about being ordained. In fact, they are I some ways the least important of those people. I heard someone recently describe ordination as stepping back from God’s work in the world, to support and equip those who are really engaged in it. Almost as if they had accepted the lesser, not the higher calling. I really liked that. We are call to be involved in the world, because God is involved in the world.

John’s question to Jesus is draws on our Old Testament reading: the Messiah will have, as his priority, care for the poor, the sick, the outcast and excluded. The Messiah is there for everyone, because God is there for everyone. Both of our political parties have spoken of a priority for the poor – one in terms of breadth of opportunity, one in terms of breadth of care. Neither has a brilliant track record on delivery. But it’s no good whinging – now, more than ever, is the time to get involved and pay our part, disciples perhaps of both Jesus and of John, calling people out for their behaviours, but also pointing to Jesus, the one in whom all our hopes are set, but the one who calls us to follow him in making God’s love real.

Now to him 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, forever and ever. Amen.