For my text:

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

(Acts 1.8)

Those words are from our first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, and our Gospel reading was the closing verses of the Gospel according to St Luke. The two works are from the same author. Luke in the final verses of his Gospel is bringing together the themes of what God was doing in Christ. In the Acts of the Apostles he has a new perspective, putting the emphasis on God’s plan for the future. In the Gospel Jesus says to the disciples, “You are witnesses of these things,” in other words, you have witnessed these events in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, but in the book of Acts this witnessing is spelled out as a huge global responsibility for the disciples; in the words I quoted as my text, they have this charge laid upon them: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” I have taken those words as our text, because we are all successors of the Apostles, because we are members of the Church of which they were the founding members.

At evensong here last Saturday we heard a very powerful anthem celebrating the work of the Apostles in a contemporary idiom. It was commissioned just over fifty years ago by the then Dean of Christ Church, Cuthbert Simpson, with words by WH Auden and music by William Walton, both of them members of this House. It’s called The Twelve, and I want now to quote just a few lines of Auden’s words describing the task for which Jesus had promised the Apostles the gift of the spirit:

They did as the Spirit bid,
Went forth into a joyless world
Of swords and rhetoric
To bring it joy.

I quote those lines because, as I said a moment ago, the task of the Apostles is also our task as their successors. And how haunting those words, originally written in the early 1960’s, sound today – “…they went forth into a joyless world | Of swords and rhetoric.”

We are confronted by a world of swords and rhetoric in the news every day: uncertainties about relations with Iran, turmoil over Brexit, the conflict in Syria and other Middle Eastern pressure points, global poverty, hate crimes, an increasingly tribal mentality in politics here and elsewhere, urgent concerns about the environment, and so on, and we too, here and now, are called to proclaim a message of joy in the face of this pandemonium, just as the original Apostles were charged to confront the often heartless world of the first century with the Gospel message of joy. And lest that sound a hopeless quest, let me mention that Walton’s setting of Auden’s words repeats the line “To bring it Joy”, and the word “Joy”, over and over again rising to a great climax to that section, in that way giving a powerful affirmation of the task of the Apostles, and of the transformation they wrought in the world. What they achieved must inspire us to continue that work with which they were first entrusted as Christ was taken up to his Father.

Let me close with another haunting line from Auden’s poem: “Holy still is Speech, but there is no sacred tongue: the Truth may be told in all.” That reminds us that the Christian Gospel, and its promise of Joy, cannot be confined within church walls or the language of the liturgy: it is inextricably bound up with the daily life of our world, and with our own daily lives. Christian Aid week, which starts this Sunday, underlines that point: we are asked to support their Christian witness, which they articulate not in words, but in concern for human flourishing – that is a powerful way of bringing joy into the joyless places in this world. But wider than that, we are to witness to the Gospel of joy by the way we contribute to public discourse about our society, by the causes we support, and by the way we live our own lives – as Auden put it, “the Truth may be told in all.” Remember how Jesus himself emphasised the eloquence of the witness of deeds as well as words when he said, in the Sermon on the Mount, “Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in Heaven.” (St Matthew 5.16).

Amen