September always feels like a new start to me. Perhaps this is partly because I’m married to a teacher! But I think most of us have some memory of that new term, new school year feeling. And for many of us, September does mark something new – it certainly does for me this year, as I begin my ministry here among you; you may also be beginning a new job, or a new academic year as students or teachers, staff, parents or grandparents. And for three particular members of the cathedral team, Steven and Joe and Tom, it’s the beginning of a new phase of life and ministry.

On this day, as we gather around God’s Word and God’s Table, we also gather to commission Joe, and Steven, and Tom, to their new ministries in this place. Later in the service, when we commission and welcome them, we’ll hear words from the Scriptures that remind us that God gives us all different gifts, different skills and different talents, and calls us to use them all to God’s glory – and Steven, Joe and Tom are certainly great examples of three very different people with very different gifts, taking up very different roles in this cathedral.

When we welcome and commission people with particular ministries, whether that’s clergy or laity, there’s a danger that we think this lets us off the hook – that because certain people are called and commissioned, the rest of us don’t have to worry about it. But I’m afraid the readings we have just heard are quite insistent that the call of God extends to everybody. We are not all called to conduct choirs, to play the organ, to train choristers – but we are all called to worship God. We are not all called to serve God with gifts of efficiency and administration, with the wisdom to arrange seating plans and manage teams – but we are all called to take our daily work, our routines and our tasks, and to do them to the glory of God. We are not all called to sing complex music, to support others and create harmonies – but we are all called to make a joyful noise to the Lord.

The call of God extends to everyone.
I’m sure you noticed that when Jesus starts speaking about the need to take up your cross – and we’ll come back to exactly what he meant by that – he didn’t just say it to Peter, or just to his disciples.

That would have made sense. Jesus is in the middle of a conversation with Peter when all this takes place. Peter had got it spectacularly right – Jesus is the Messiah, the person God had promised, the person God had specially chosen to save God’s people. And then Peter had followed up by getting it spectacularly wrong – when Jesus started to explain that being the Messiah meant a whole heap of unpleasant things, Peter had decided that was not on. And Jesus responds – not just to Peter. Not just to his disciples, the people who have already made a commitment follow him. Jesus’ response to Peter getting it so spectacularly wrong, Jesus’ decision to talk about the need to listen to God’s call and take up the cross, was to speak to the people who are casually interested, wandering past, stopping briefly so they can tell their neighbours they saw a celebrity. Jesus tells them that God’s call extends to them – to even the most casual of onlookers. If they want to follow him, they can and should – but it will cost them.

In other words, God is calling them, just as God calls everybody. Put like that, this sounds quite abstract – but it really isn’t. Put the way Isaiah, and James, and Jesus put it, it is concrete and – certainly to me – challenging, not to say intimidating. Take up your cross – in other words, walk in Jesus’ way and know that this is the way of execution. Or tame the restless evil of your tongue, lest you cause pain to your brothers and sisters. Or listen to God’s word and teach it, even though this means physical and verbal abuse.

God is calling them to do something specific and concrete. And God is warning them that it will be painful and costly – but worth it.

For the prophet Isaiah, that call is to be a prophet: a hearer of God’s word and a teacher of God’s people. Being a prophet is not a comfortable place to be. Responding faithfully to God means he risks and receives the hostility of his community – blows and insults. And yet if he had refused to respond faithfully to God, that community would not have heard God’s call to them: the call to justice, to repentance, to listen to God.

Because what we do matters to God and God uses what we do to shape the world around us. God’s call can be painful and costly, not because God wants us to suffer, but because we live in a fallen world. This theme of fallenness is a key one for my understanding of who we are in relation to God. We are fallen people who live in a fallen world – meaning that we are people who can’t get it right, who live in a world where so many things are wrong. God calls us to
enter into that suffering – just as Jesus did – not because suffering is something God wants or approves of, but because we can only work to bring suffering to an end from within. And God calls us, by our actions and decisions, to build something better – something more like God’s Kingdom – just like Jesus did.

When we take up our cross, we are entering into Jesus’ way. We are entering into the path that recognises the fallenness of the world and commits to doing what we can and what God calls us to, to build the Kingdom.

So on this morning that we commission people to serve among us, it is good to be reminded that this is a responsibility we can’t delegate. We are all called, in our own way, to take up the cross and to follow. To put ourselves in difficult places and walk difficult roads, in responding to God’s call and committing ourselves to build God’s Kingdom. That calling belongs to all of us – but beyond that common ground, our calling will look different for each of us.

Maybe you are called to a ministry of music, like Steven or Tom. A ministry that is about creating beauty and inspiring those of us who gather in worship to see a vision of God and hear God’s call.

Maybe you are called to a ministry of teaching, like Isaiah, or like Steven. A ministry that is about unfolding God’s call for other people, that is about witnessing to God’s Kingdom and building people who will work for justice.

Maybe you are called to a ministry of administration, like Joe. A ministry that makes sure everything is in order and God’s people are welcomed and valued.

Maybe you are called to something quite different.

But to all of us Jesus says: follow me. Those who give up their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it.