Today marks a significant threshold in the emerging vocation of St Martin-in-the-Fields. I want to explain what I believe that vocation is and why people might in the future look back on today as a significant day.

A stranger approaches St Martin’s and, the chances are, the first thing they’re aware of is its unique location and its beautiful architecture. But beyond that they quickly come to know the name of St Martin-in-the-Fields and associate it with a variety of things – its royal connections, its history of broadcasting, its connection to many bold initiatives, its links to a world-famous orchestra – good and beautiful things that together constitute a heritage and reputation to cherish.

Together those things constitute the inheritance of St Martin’s. But once people have visited a couple of times, they tend to become more interested in what St Martin’s is doing today. They’ll be drawn to its programme of events and activities, its vibrant and inclusive congregational life, its honouring of and work with the stranger and the destitute, its accessible classical music, and the quality of the food, retail goods and hospitality on offer downstairs. These are the things we work so hard on and try to do as well as we know how to do them.

But when people draw close to the heart of St Martin’s they find something that’s more than a cascade of events and activities. They find a quality of relationship, a sense of fun and adventure, a feeling of friendship and kindness, an aura of understanding and trust, a mood of purpose and compassion, all of which together we call community. And they find a depth of searching and wondering, a quality of wisdom and tenderness, a well of joy and playfulness, a longing for connection and holiness, all of which together we call communion. Of course we’re not angels, and sometimes we get it wrong – occasionally, badly wrong. The point is, what keeps people at St Martin’s is not what we do but what we are, not busy-ness but belonging. And unlike most churches, at St Martin’s we’ve come to understand that that belonging isn’t limited to being a congregation member. It extends to all aspects of our life – commercial, cultural, and charitable, and includes staff and volunteers, customers and clients, regular worshipers and occasional visitors – even annual donors to the Appeal and listeners to our broadcast worship. Discovering how these different aspects bring out the best in each other is the key to our unique vocation.

Just cherishing, fostering and renewing these three parts of our life – the resources, the programmes, and the fellowship – tends to be, for much of the time, the summit of our ambitions. But I want to suggest today that there are two further dimensions that we tend to be shy about but in fact are also true to our vocation. The first is the message we want the world to hear. We may say, we already have a marketing manager and a communications officer, we’re on the radio a lot, we do a big Christmas Appeal, everyone’s heard of us – what more do we need? But think, most of our marketing and communications relates to our events and programming. It’s saying ‘Come to this,’ or ‘Don’t miss that,’ or ‘Look what a treat you’ll find here.’ Which is great. But the people of St Martin’s have more to say than that. They have a message that speaks of grace and mercy, of justice and peace, of compassion and understanding, of beauty, truth and goodness, of hunger and thirst for righteousness, of faith in the face of fear, hope in the face of death, and love in the face of suffering. And they have a story of how homeless people were a problem until we discovered they
were a gift in whom to see the living God, and commercial operations were a necessity until we discovered they were a blessing to teach the community the disciplines of sustainable life together, and of how music was about art and performance until we discovered it was a symbol of the expression and the creativity longing to burst forth from all God’s oppressed and excluded people.

And so the next chapter of our life can be about building on the wisdom of what we’ve learnt, and the reputation that we’ve established, and taking this message far and wide, through the media and through the internet, into government, business, and civil society, to the wider church, to tourists and visitors, to neighbours and partners, in the UK and overseas. Every single day brings a news story or a conversation or a personal experience that tells us how few institutions communicate this hope, how many people are longing for words they can trust coming from communities they admire embodied in practices they can imitate issuing in a life they can join. We’re shy to do this because it smacks of smugness, of riding for a fall, of arrogance even. But the point is, we’re not applauding ourselves, we’re telling others of news they’re longing to hear, of discoveries we’ve recently made, of joy that’s transforming us from the inside out. It’s good news. How can we keep from singing?

And the second further dimension that I believe is part of our emerging vocation is about the highly immodest, rather clumsy, but nonetheless unavoidable word, impact. It’s great when someone is drawn closer to God through worship, is reconciled with a friend over coffee downstairs, finds their feet again through being treated with humanity after being destitute, is moved to tears in a concert, or begins a lifelong friendship at a social event or on a pilgrimage. These are the regular glimpses of glory that together make this a community that manufactures joy. But the world beyond is still in many ways a mess. We want to multiply these special moments. But we also want to influence many levels and dimensions of society, nationally and internationally, through all the channels available to us, so as to enrich common life and culture, alleviate and in time eradicate poverty and injustice, and promote love, joy and peace. We’re far from perfect ourselves, so we must constantly be prepared to evaluate our performance, be open to external appraisal, and be eager enhance our practice. But knowledge of our imperfections shouldn’t inhibit us from cultivating partnerships that advance the change we long to see in the world.

Our reading from Genesis today tells us about the covenant that God made with Abraham. All Abraham and Sarah knew was that they were old, childless, alone and far from home. It wasn’t a promising combination. But in this story God comes and whispers in their ear, ‘You are old. But you will have a child. You are alone, but I will make you one of a multitude. You are barren, but I will make you fruitful. You are a long way from home, but I will give you a new home, a promised land, where you can live a life that inspires and transforms and gives hope to other nations. Don’t waste time wondering why I have chosen you, why you’ve been lucky, whether it’s all going to fall flat on its face one of these days. Concentrate on two things only. Be faithful to the covenant I’m making with you. And be fruitful. Let your fruit plant and grow and flower and bring forth seed that heals the earth. You are to be a blessing. That’s why I’ve called you.’

Like Abraham and Sarah, St Martin’s could concentrate on what it doesn’t have. It could say, we feel fragile, we’re much less sure of ourselves than we look, we’re tentative about some parts of our faith and we’re a little reluctant to expose every aspect of our lives. A lot of the time we find it easier to talk about glorious failure than purposeful achievement. But like Abraham and Sarah we’ve been on a long journey. And we’ve made many precious and wondrous discoveries. And we’ve been called by God. And what we’ve been called to is a covenant of fruitfulness, which calls us both to be faithful to God and to bring forth fruit that heals the earth. We can’t do the second without the first. But we can’t be content with the first if we’re being offered the opportunity and we’re hearing the call to do the second.

And this brings us to the licensing of our new associate vicar for partnership development, and to the formal beginning of our partnership with St Stephen, Walbrook. If we were content to enhance
our heritage, to strengthen our programmes, and to deepen our common life, we wouldn’t be hiring Jonathan and we wouldn’t be partnering with St Stephen’s. The reason we want today to mark the beginning of something special is because we’re exploring ways to convey our message and identifying how we can enhance our impact. St Stephen’s is an admirable church with faithful people and a glorious building; but by partnering with us, St Stephen’s is saying, ‘We want to walk a journey like the one you’ve been on, we want to find abundance in scarcity, we want to expand our programmes and deepen our common life so we too can be a blessing to communities beyond ourselves.’ And it’s the nature of partnership that at the same time St Martin’s will also grow and change and learn through what the people of St Stephen’s teach us about ministry and mission and faith.

Jonathan is here to walk with the people of St Stephen’s as they make this journey together. And Jonathan is among us to develop a range of partnerships with communities and communions near and far, of which St Stephen’s is, we hope, the first. With St Stephen’s we are making a covenant of fruitfulness inspired by the covenant God makes with Abraham. Our hope is not just that through this partnership St Stephen’s will develop its commercial, cultural, charitable and congregational life so as to become self-sustaining, but that before long it is partnering with other institutions to lead them on a similar path.

Over time we trust we will develop many such partnerships. In some we’ll offer services such as estate and HR oversight to institutions so they can concentrate attention on their programming and common life. In others we’ll walk alongside churches as they develop a model like ours of growing a commercial arm to galvanise their culture and make them sustainable. In others again we’ll be looking to bring our national profile alongside local initiative to enhance work around poverty and destitution. And in others again we hope to partner to help congregations grow in relation to disability issues or enhance other forms of inclusion like our Sunday International Group. In these and many other ways we’ll be looking to establish a covenant of fruitfulness with partners and friends all around the country and beyond.

We could settle for enhancing our resources, developing our programmes, and deepening our common life. Those are all fine and demanding things, and most churches in the country would be overjoyed to have such an aspiration. But we’re being called beyond that. We’re being called to share our message and to influence the wider church and world. And right now the way we’re seeking to do that is by making mutually-enriching partnerships and working with other institutions to help them better realise their vocations. Why? Because we believe that’s God’s way. God in Christ didn’t shout from afar or keep a light hidden on a hill far away. God in Christ made relationships one by one, some close and constant, some occasional and passing, and came alongside people of all kinds, opening up their hearts, setting their souls on fire, and lifting from them the burden of oppression or pain or guilt. That’s what a covenant of fruitfulness looks like. Today we cross that threshold and enter that covenant.