When all the works to this building are completed, there will be a plaque put on the wall alongside those of the great and good, and the not necessarily good. The words on it will say this:

*To commemorate all whose lives and stories have not been told here in past centuries including the victims of greed, cruelty and exploitation.*

And the words we heard quoted in today’s gospel will also appear: *the last shall be first and the first last.*

It will remind us that many people have passed and will pass through these doors; people of wealth and influence, people of corruption and manipulation, people of poverty and desperation, worshippers, visitors, tourists, pilgrims, robbers, vandals and nobility. God loves and calls each one; yet it is the people who others consider the least who will be first in the kingdom of God.

Our beautiful building has been taking an awful lot of our energy, concern and time. But St Marylebone is not fundamentally a building – it is people. The motley crew I have alluded to just now. And you and I. All the people who have said their prayers here over the years, and will do in the future.

When the word which is translated ‘church’ first appears in the New Testament, in Matthew Chapter 16, it is the Greek word Ecclesia which means an assembly, people called out into a congregation. It is where Jesus says to Peter ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my ecclesia, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’

Over the years since this Parish Church was built, our ecclesia has had good times and bad. It has experienced conflict, it has been bombed, it has been a beacon of healing and hope. It has been a place of both rejoicing and sorrow, worship and outreach.
in a busy part of London. It has had faithful members who have cared and prayed and worked. At present it is like a patient on an operating table, its body shot through with scaffolding, and echoing with the noise of intrusive reconstruction. But so far at least the gates of hell have not prevailed against it. Halleluiah!

Perhaps one of the charisms we are learning in this church is that to be vulnerable and weak is to be a very important part of the ecclesia. Healing and wholeness is at the heart of what we do and the work of healing requires us all to be vulnerable and open to the work of the Spirit. St Paul speaks about this in our first reading.

‘The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words.’ Paul knew the truth of that weakness from his own experience. He began as one the ‘first’. On the day of this conversion, he rode out of Jerusalem proud, self-reliant, priding himself on his pure descent, his Rabbinical knowledge, his Pharasaical training, his absolute conviction that he was always right. But after his encounter with the risen Christ, he rode into Damascus, struck down, blind, dependent on the care of others, realising that all the things he prided himself on had lost their allure now that he had encountered his Messiah. He had become one of the ‘least.’ In Philippians 3:7 he says this

‘Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’.

The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

When our church is finally restored we must remember that.

As we seek God’s grace to continue as Ecclesia, we will not be tempted by pride, grandeur or boasting, but we will treasure the small, the humble, the least.

Amen.