

What a privilege to stand here on what is such a significant day not just for you, Jessica, but for your brothers and sisters in the Community, as well as those here to my right who have travelled with you over the years. Thank you for gathering us here today and for this invitation to preach today.

It was good to sit down with you the other week, and hear your story. That in itself I found humbling and moving – you were so open and honest. And indeed I ask myself right now, as you probably do yourself, what is someone from an evangelical, charismatic, Quaker background, and as you described yourself, an accidental Anglican to boot, doing turning up here wanting to be a nun. God, it seems, has a sense of humour.

However, as you reflected, both your evangelical and Quaker background had something in common: they brought an expectation and a hope that God makes a difference in our lives – how we behave and act, how we care and decide. I just hope the accidental Anglicanism doesn't dilute this fine tradition and undo any of the good work!

Which is why perhaps you have been attracted to this Benedictine community, and I mean this one. It stems from your deep conviction that God wants you for something, and God has brought you to this place today. This wholehearted commitment is what is reflected in today's gospel passage. Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness – everything else will follow. It will all fit into place, which is why we don't need to worry – you, Jessica, a worrier, no!

This is Benedict's 'prefer nothing to Christ', I guess, the good zeal of the religious, 'that he may bring us all together to everlasting life'. Prefer nothing to Christ – the wholehearted gift, which is the only way true love can give. Today is your wholehearted commitment in response to this love, and it is to this community in this place.

God's call: it has to be this which brings you here today. But as you admit there's been some mess along the way. I once heard Bishop Jack Nicholls quoting an unnamed sister from an Oxfordshire convent, saying that her prayer had become so simple. It was this: 'God bless this mess'. Because it is a pretty common experience of religious people to respond to God's call with a sense of unworthiness, or worse, the imposter syndrome: who am I to be doing this?

Which is why St Paul's words to the troublesome Christians of Corinth that we've heard today are so important. I think he loved that church especially, because although they clearly exasperated him, he wrote to them more than once, at least twice, and scholars reckon maybe more times than that. He loved them and was at the same time so frustrated by them. So he wrote to them about being clay jars – fragile containers and very vulnerable. And yet, in all our fragility, bearers of God's love and light.

You see, God doesn't wait until we are perfect. Every church and monastery could have a notice by the front door saying, 'if you think you're perfect, don't bother coming in' – this might be another good reason why you might feel at home here! I remember some biblical scholar suggesting that the clay produced in and around Corinth was not of the highest quality, and cracked easily, which meant that it wasn't the best to make, for example, wine goblets. But it did serve very well to make lanterns because light could shine through the cracks.

So we get Paul's lovely picture where our vulnerability actually enables us to get the perspective right. The extraordinary power belongs to God alone: it gets us off the hook about having to be God. It's alright to be who we are and let God do the rest. We see this working out in the life of Moses, the great leader of the holy people of God, who after his encounter with the divine presence in the burning bush can only say, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' God effectively replies: The proof of the pudding is in the eating; when you have brought this people out of Egypt you will see.

'Who am I to be doing this?' Don't we all ask this question some of the time? Maybe it is the poets who understand this as much as anyone else – a lot of our theology makes more sense, it seems to me, as poetry rather than prose, which is probably why monastics spend so much time in the Psalter.

In one of his poems, Walt Whitman invites each of us to 'weave the song of myself':

*The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,  
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,  
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,  
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,  
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,  
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar.....  
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,  
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.*

I like that idea, though perhaps Gerard Manley Hopkins gets a more theological balance. This great Jesuit poet had a sacramental view of the whole world - God in all things, though, if that sounds a bit grand, perhaps more accessible is the idea of God in the bits and pieces of everyday life. He had the great gift of investing the natural world with spiritual significance. Someone described the nub of his theology as 'I am I because God wants me to be me'.

In his poem '*As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame*' he sees God reflected in the whole of life, and invents the word 'selving' for human beings becoming who they are. He continues the poem in this way, and excuse the language of his day:

*'I say more, the just man justices;  
keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is -  
Christ - for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.'*

Jessica, you have been called here by the God who wants you for something, to act in God's eye what in God's eye you are - Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places, so prefer nothing to Christ who preferred nothing to you. May you know here the unconditional love and acceptance of our God who, if he can take the cracked pots of the Christian community at Corinth to reflect his love, can take the cracked pots of this place too.

And remember for any of us called to follow the way of Christ, including those of you doing so in the steps of Benedict, we are not going to be marked in any quantitative way – the quality of our prayers or obedience or depth. What strikes me, as an amateur reading Benedict's rule, is his generosity in terms of keeping it: for every rule there seems to be an exception. In other words there is a practicality about it which gives you a framework for your 'selving', being fully who you are as you respond to Christ's call.

This brings to mind a delightful story I read of the priest welcoming people at a certain station along the Camino, the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostella. This is what he told the pilgrims: 'Remember, God doesn't count your steps or Santiago weigh your pack – what they measure is your heart, O pilgrim, so look to your heart.... and take care of your feet.'

Jessica, as you commit yourself in love and faith to this community and they commit themselves to you, take that priest's wise advice: look to your heart, and take care of your feet. May God bless you and may you know just how much He loves you.