

**'But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.' 2 Cor 4:7**

In a passage from her first novel, *Oranges are not the only fruit*, Jeanette Winterson explores the idea that it might be possible for one person to live several parallel lives. She suggests that each time we make a choice between two paths we leave part of us behind, which continues along the road we would have taken had we made the alternative choice.

It's a very attractive thought. Most of us find it hard to let go of what else might have been possible, had we lived and chosen differently.

But as a reality rather than a philosophical idea, it doesn't actually work. Every choice involves letting go of another option. The 12 people you are here to support today have chosen to serve the Church and the world as deacons. They are now on a particular path. Or 12 particular paths, as not one of them will live it in the same way as another. There will be as many variations on the theme as you see here in front of you.

Because the transition from what they were yesterday to what they will become today does not involve morphing into some sort of clergy clone. There are 12 people here who have individuality and personality in bucket-loads. And that is a very good thing. They are deeply human in all of their glory and variety, quirks and foibles, gifts, beauty, fragility and strength. And they still will be tomorrow. So they walk 12 paths, not one. And through their difference they touch a wide range of human beings, and reflect a diversity of truths about God.

But why are they on this particular track at all? They are here because they have been magnetized, pulled, drawn onwards by the same call which came to Samuel in the Temple. And they have at times been as unable to comprehend that God is calling them as Samuel was. The voice probably spoke rather more than three times before some of them gave in. And many will have needed someone like Eli, wiser and further along the road, to advise them.

But they were wise to be cautious – this is a scary road to walk. Partly because it involves continual negotiation between this vocation and all of the other relationships and commitments God has called them to. They will be deacons, and they will still be friends, colleagues, partners, in-laws, sons, daughters and parents. When people ask me 'when did you get your vocation?' I sometimes want to say 'which one?. Lawyer, that was about 20 years ago. Wife – 1999. Mother – a bit more recently, and then again. Oh, but you mean priest?!

All of us here today have our callings – and most of us are called to more than one thing. We need to juggle them and cope with the conflicts as gently and creatively as we can. That will be hard for these people, and hard on those who love them – it already is. Their parishes and training incumbents have a huge responsibility in enabling them to juggle well.

But what is this particular calling about? What are the clergy for? You might well ask. A character in a novel by Alice Walker says: 'As a minister, I am quite unnecessary to anyone else's salvation. Surely it is one of the universe's little jokes that I must be a minister in order to make them see this'.

'I am quite unnecessary to anyone else's salvation'. Our salvation is the reality of our daily connection and reconnection with the God who loves us utterly and unconditionally. And you have your own ways of getting in touch with the sacred in life, in each other, in yourselves. You don't need the clergy to connect with God. You don't need these 12 people. You don't even need the guy in the pointy hat!

AND YET – to deacons and priests is given the task of accompanying you in your search for God, of opening doors which you might not otherwise have thought of opening, of walking alongside you and drawing your attention to things you might not otherwise have noticed. Of pointing to God in the reality of your daily lives.

The theologian Austen Farrer used to say that the task of the clergy was to 'keep alive the idea of God'. To make sure that people are introduced to the possibility of God, and to all that Jesus has to show us of what God is like. To awaken people to the idea that the ordinary things of life are shot through with God's glory. The clergy are to hold all of this before us, trying always to be awake and alive to God's presence, 'dressed for action with their lamps lit' as Jesus says in Luke's Gospel, ready to know Christ in all that is, and then to open the door, to sit down and eat with him, and to gather others into the party too.

So the point of the clergy is not the clergy. The point of the clergy is what they point to. 'We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour'.

Now there is a school of thought which says that the clergy do this best by being rather more religious than other people. Rather better behaved. To put it bluntly by being less sinful. Having less doubts, more conviction and preferably all the answers. In short by having about them an aura of perfection.

Well it's never worked for me. I've had it with perfection! I speak as a recovering perfectionist so I do know what I'm talking about. It was line-managing a perfectionist verger that pushed me over the edge, but I was saved from the abyss – from the guilt and self-doubt of a failed perfectionist – by the poet Louis MacNeice. His poem titled *Entirely* debunks the idea that we can ever get anything completely right, remember anything perfectly, or find happiness wholly in one place. He concludes 'In brute reality there is no/Road that is right entirely'. With MacNeice I believe that there is no journey executed to perfection and no life lived without any sense of 'maybe that wasn't so wise'.

We won't achieve perfection. *They* won't achieve perfection. And anyway it's such a sterile concept – all about getting the fine detail right when what we need to look at is the bigger picture of whether we and the world are becoming more whole.

And yes, I know that in Matthew's gospel Jesus tells us 'Be ye perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect,' but my commentary reliably tells me that the Greek word he used has less to do with perfection as we understand it, and more to do with completion, maturity and mercy.

So I'm with St Paul, who tells us 'we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us'. That 'treasure' Paul talks about is the truth, the overwhelming truth, that God loves and holds and nurtures and stands by us in everything that happens to us in life. That God is at work in the darkest places and the direst situations in our world. We can do nothing that will separate us from God's love as seen in the face of Jesus Christ. However it may sometimes feel, we are not alone.

So that's the treasure. And the clay jars Paul talks about are those who hold that treasure and offer it to others. So here they are before you: 12 clay jars. Formed of the dust of the earth, fragile and vulnerable, easily scratched, chipped, even cracked. Carrying with them the marks of their experiences – experiences of joy, loss, achievement, struggle, pain, insight and challenge. All that life has thrown at them so far, which has shaped them into the clay jars that they are. They are not being called to be perfect. They are being called to offer all of that, and all that they are, in service. They are being called to be true to themselves and to grow into being fully themselves. Fully what God hopes and longs for them. They are called to serve, because they are willing to carry treasure in clay jars and out of the vulnerability of that 'way of being' to offer the treasure to you.

They will become all that they can be through connecting with God in themselves, in others, in the church and in the world. In the office, on the bus, doing the shopping and in the park. When they're with their congregations, with their friends, with their families, or alone.

And then they will offer that experience to you. So that you can discover your own salvation – your own sacred connections, your own understanding of God as you follow your own callings – in business and education and engineering and volunteering, in playing with your children and in being at home.

Those of you who will welcome these people into your homes and your parishes will need to nurture them as they will seek to nurture you. You will need to give them the space to discover God outside of the church as well as within. And they need to give you that space as well. Because to work towards wholeness and to respond to God's love is to see the so-called ordinariness of ourselves, our lives and the world to be the miracle that it really is. It is to experience God not only in church but in looking at a painting, in holding the hand of a friend, in music, in laughter, and in the bricks and mortar of a city.

So the 12 of you have chosen your paths. They may not be roads which feel entirely right. But that isn't because they are wrong. It's because in parts they are complicated and hard. You will continue to face head-on, for yourselves and alongside other people, some of the hardest human experiences. You will never pretend that they don't exist or that faith makes them easy to bear. But Paul does assure us that we will not be crushed, forsaken or destroyed. We will be fragile clay pots still holding that treasure, and offering it to others, in a ministry which although it is hard is also remarkable, energizing, privileged, and tremendously rewarding.

So *in one sense* the point of the clergy is not the clergy. The point of the clergy is what they point to. But it matters fundamentally who is doing the pointing and how they do it. Choosing this path has meant leaving other possibilities behind. But what you must bring with you is all of your human experience and being, remaining true to yourself as God created you. Because that is how you are best equipped to keep alive the idea of God, and to hold out treasure to all who long for it.

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