

Some of you might be aware that I am currently in my second probationary year as a dispersed religious. I am a member of an order called the Society of the Resurrection which consists of men and women just like me, all looking to live the religious life in the villages, towns and cities we find ourselves in. We are, if you like, monks and nuns, holding the Community of the Resurrection, a large monastery in West Yorkshire as our spiritual home, but attempting to do our best to live the same rule as the monks there, out in the big wide world. In June 2017, I will take formal vows and commit to the rule of life for the long-term.

Why? What is the point of trying to live to such a way of life in the 21st Century? Well, all of this is, of course, a way of trying to live according to the Christian ideal. Living the Christian way of life seems harder today than ever. Society tells us that we can pick and choose what we believe, and yet Christianity tells us that we cannot – that there is only one truth and we see that truth most perfectly displayed in the life of Jesus Christ and communicated to the world through his Church. So the rule helps to keep things in perspective and keep our focus on what really matters. So far the rule has generally been unbelievably life-giving. It has given my life purpose and structure and when I have been prone to falling into laziness, struggling with prayer or getting my priorities a little back to front, the rule and my responsibilities to my brother monks and sister nuns, helps me to persevere and brings me back into line. It is a really useful tool to keep my relationship with God

on the right path. I wonder, is there any tools that you feel may help you to keep God at the top of your agenda's? Is there something that this church could do to help you establish a pattern of life to keep priorities in the right order?

One of the rules involves living without excess possessions or distractions. I would say that this is one of the hardest rules, especially in our commercially driven age. We are groomed from a very young age to believe that we are what we possess, but we only need look at the inequality such an outlook produces to see why it is so dangerous. For instance, did you know that 1% of the world's population owns more than the other 99% put together? As Christians, we should feel quite ashamed that the world's resources are so poorly shared and inequality is so very rife in our world.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus reveals a little more as to just why such a philosophy of greed and possession is so very misguided. God loves us for who we are, not what we own. But our possessions get in the way of his love. They become a barrier in our relationship with him. When push comes to shove, we all too often hold on to what we possess rather than sharing it with those in need and we put our energies into protecting that rather than protecting our relationship with God and each other. And so Jesus ends today's passage with some guidance, 'if you wish to become my disciples you must give up all your possessions'. How does that make you feel? Personally, it makes me feel unnerved to say the least. Listen to those words once again: 'if you

wish to become my disciples you must give up all your possessions'. The real point is that if we wish to become the people who can inhabit the eternal life that Jesus promises, then we must let go of our obsession with possessing things and replace it with a real longing for God's good kingdom.

Sharing what we have is one excellent way of opening up our souls to God's love for us. And we see that played out a little more in the reading we had from St Paul's letter to Philemon. Philemon was one of many leaders of a church in Colossae in modern day Turkey. Paul encourages Philemon by saying to him 'I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ'. Here Paul alludes to the sharing of faith being important to our own discipleship journey, but also that faith and good works go hand in hand. Faith is only strengthened by recognising what we can do for Christ, through acts of service to Christ's church and his people. Listen again to Paul's words: 'I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ'.

In this instance, Paul makes specific mention of the Christian service he would have Philemon do. Philemon's slave has run away and somehow found himself imprisoned with Paul. Paul, hearing the slave's plight, writes to Philemon thanking him for the love he has received from the people of the Church in Colossae and for Philemon's part in building up their body. But Paul reminds Philemon that we are only as worthy as

the last good deed we have done in Christ's name. And so, ever blunt, Paul requests that Philemon continue to prove his Christian credentials by releasing the slave and caring for him within his church community, this time not as slave and master, but as equals in the service of the Jesus.

God is the lover of souls and the great potter who moulds us day by day and week by week. God has a plan for us, and we see that plan in the testimony of Jesus and the Church he would have us build. God moulds us through experiences and situations. Every experience an opportunity and every situation a chance to grow. We can ignore God's callings and consider them an unwelcome inconvenience, but as Jeremiah declares in our Old Testament reading today, then, through our own making, we become numbered amongst those to be broken down and, in the end, destroyed. Or we can grasp it in both hands and see all things as the God-given opportunities they truly are and, in Jeremiah's words, we will be numbered as those whom God is building up and planting. This can be our lives and our church. All we have to do is grasp every opportunity that God places before us and our Church community can continue to grow in every way.

Sometimes, we need to think about what comes first in our own lives. For me, having a rule of life has helped me to reprioritise and realise that I need to work at putting God before possessions and pastimes. What things might you do to help God to become more important in your life?

Jesus Christ shows us how we may be brought back into relationship with God and draws us into that relationship through the promptings of his Spirit. As the Spirit calls so we feel it, sometimes exciting, sometimes extremely uncomfortable, but a calling nonetheless.

Jesus establishes the Church as his mechanism for transforming the world and he calls you and me to be the ones to build that church, here and now, today. Our faith only grows as we begin to put God first. As we share it and respond to Jesus's call to serve, so it blossoms and flourishes. We are fed from the well of life as we look to Jesus, the guardian of our souls. God the Father, the loving potter, forms and moulds us by calling us to his love and service. And as we put him first, so we care less for ourselves and more for others. Now that's a world I want to be a part of, and it starts anew for us every morning.

Amen.