

Jesus Christ walked among the people of Judaea: the rich and the poor, the simple and the learned. He had salvation for all of them, and each of them needed to respond to him in their own quality. Contrary to popular belief, it isn't demanded of anyone that he should cease to be the person he is in order to convert to Christ. God's salvation enhances and favours what he has previously created.

The friars preachers came into existence in order to meet a particular need at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It was undoubtedly a time of rebirth in human culture; civilisation was emerging very clearly from a long dark age -of violence and oppression; and people were beginning to feel that there was room for humanity and for each individual, and that there were better ways to organise the world than the brutal forms of feudal law, where everyone was enslaved to someone superior.

The learning of the grace of God was the Church's way of sharing in this regenerating world. They say you can win more favour with honey than with vinegar. Dominic was filled with grace and inspired by the beauty of God; and he was therefore equipped to inspire others with the same sense of joy in God, and the capacity to speak eloquently of God, in a way that warmed and moved people's hearts.

This great gift is what the Church in our time desperately needs. We need people who can lay down the fearsome criticism and bad temper of the past, and speak to people who have simply never heard the good news of God. Those of us who know Christ can be very sure that he is the healer the world needs at this and every time. We pray that he may inspire people to speak of him as he deserves, and communicate him as Dominic did, so generously and gracefully.

Let us pray for the Dominicans in Leicester and in Nottingham. That they may emulate their saintly founder, and carry Christ into the minds and hearts of people.

The readings today speak of two functions that need to be fulfilled: sentry, and shepherd.

The sentry is needed when the city is in danger. The human city is comprehensively in danger from without and within; and all sorts of people offer themselves to guard it and keep it safe: politicians, pressure-groups, journalists with attitude, pundits of all sorts. Ezekiel, however, is none of these. He is appointed by God to watch over the House of Israel. His task is -like that of every prophet -to speak in God's name to God's people.

The shepherd is needed by the flock, because they are harassed and dejected. Again, all sorts of people offer themselves as shepherds in the world; but Jesus tells us (in another place) that he is the true shepherd, and his guarantee is his willingness to lay down his life for the sheep; he is also willing to leave the safe sheep to go out into danger, searching for the lost.

Neither of these two functions can be fulfilled from earthly motivation. It is nice to be of help, and most of us enjoy the gratitude of those we have helped; but that mild selfishness isn't enough to fuel what the work of redemption demands. What we need is people who have turned their lives over to the work of service, and accepted the guidance of Christ the shepherd. So often our helping hands are paralysed by our unwisdom and lack of love: we would like to help, but we are prevented. None of us is worthy to save anyone else. We are all in need of the love of Christ.

Jean Vianney was a man whose very average intellectual gifts appeared to disqualify him from candidacy for the priesthood. But a good priest is not one who 'can pass exams in mediaeval scholarship. To be a sentry, it is only required that we should be given insight by the Holy Spirit. To be a good shepherd is a matter of the heart rather than the intellect. Jean gave himself without any limit, because he knew that Christ would act in him; he had no agenda of his own that was not that of Jesus. Therefore the grace of God met no barriers in him, and thousands of people met the forgiveness of Christ in him.

We pray for the pastoral clergy of the Catholic Church. May they welcome the grace of their ordination, and be good sentries, and true shepherds, in Christ's name.