

St Francis of Assisi – Rev'd Hans Christiansen – Sunday 4th October 2009

Readings: Galatians 6:14-18, Psalm 148: 7-14, Matthew 11:25-3

St Francis is perhaps the most loved of all Christian saints. There is something so loveable about the humble Francis. His gentle and kind manner touches both young and old, Christian or no Christian.

I remember as a child being very drawn to Francis. I was fortunate enough to several times be visiting Assisi and Francis' cave where he spend much time in meditation and I vividly remember the image of the frescos of Francis receiving the sacred stigmata, the wounds of Christ, on his hands and feet.

Perhaps it was his kind face, perhaps it was the boyish fascination with the bleeding wounds on his hands and feet, or perhaps it was a deep, but unconscious, recognition of Christ's love pouring through Francis, through his simplicity, his humility and his poverty – that touched me as a child.

Francis has, no doubt, fascinated millions and he continues to do so. Movies are made about him; a monastic order has been formed through his work; countless books are written about Francis – Why? Hard to say exactly why but I think it is safe to say that the main reason why is because in Francis we see so much of Jesus manifested.

Bonaventura, who as a little child had been healed by Francis, in his beautiful biography about Francis from 1266 described him as, "*a morning star in the midst of a cloud*".

G.K. Chesterton, in his book about Francis, described him in modern times as, "*the mirror of Christ rather like the moon is the mirror of the sun*".

But who was Francis? Francis lived around 800 years ago in the Middle Ages. He was from Assisi, from the beautiful Umbria valley in Italy. He was a man of the upper classes. He had a wealthy father and a good life. He aspired to be a noble knight leading a life of courtly love. He was born with a very soft nature, always loving the poor yet felt repulsed by the lepers.

Yet gradually Francis came to see Christ more and more in the very people he despised. He was a man of prayer from early on and the more he prayed the more he was drawn to the crucified Christ and to the people he couldn't embrace.

As he gradually grew spiritually Francis one day in Church heard Jesus' instructions to the apostles as speaking directly and literally to him:

"Take no gold or silver or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals, or a staff, for labourers deserve their food." (Matt 10:9)

His response to this call was a spontaneous and passionate outburst of longing: 'This is what I wish, this is what I seek, this is what I long to do with all my heart!'

From that day on he never really wavered. He gave up all his riches to follow Christ. He made a deliberate choice to live in extreme poverty, to embrace 'Lady Poverty' and to live his life among outcasts — sick people, beggars, lepers.

His chosen way of life was so radical people probably thought he was mad. Certainly he was given to dramatic actions. He preached using mime, song and music. He talked with wolves, birds and rabbits. He preached love of Muslims in the time of crusades. He kissed lepers and when he renounced his possessions, he stripped naked in public in front of the bishop.

Francis was gifted with a wonderful temperament with a loving and joyful heart. He was, much like we heard Christ describe himself in today's gospel, gentle and kind.

He was a deep soul who loved the poor and broken, but above all he was a man who loved Christ deeply and loved people and creation deeply. Through his love of Christ he grew into what St Paul in today's epistle reading calls '*a new creation*' so much so that tradition says that at the end of this life he received the same wounds as Christ had on the cross.

Francis was totally in love with Christ especially with the crucified Christ hidden in the marginalised.

One writer writes:

"Boundless love was what Francis saw when he looked at Christ, so that was what he aimed for. This was no abstract or intellectual love, but a specific, total giving of himself to whoever was with him at the moment".

But Francis was, of course like all of us, not perfect. He was, as we all are, a human being full of paradox and complexities. His life was a series of experiments, getting it wrong and trying another way, working it out as he went along. He founded the Franciscans, although he was not happy about the idea of them being a formal order. He painfully let go of the path set out for him from his family. He struggled to overcome his dislike of lepers. He kept struggling throughout his life with temptations. He sent his brothers out to the world, yet missed them terribly. He preached radical poverty and detachment from all worldly things yet he still zealously sought the approval of the rich and mighty pope and bishops.

He was, much like the apostle Paul, sorrowful yet joyful, crying yet laughing, living yet dying.

So what can we learn from St Francis?

What fascinates me about Francis is that he was a man of courage, passion and peace, a man who followed his heart and was full of joy because he did what he was born to do.

Francis had courage to be himself – his struggle to be true to who he was, wasn't always easy for him, like it is not always easy for us to live true to our heart's calling.

Surely you and I do not necessarily need to imitate Christ and Francis' extreme poverty.

But we can definitely all be inspired by Francis' love of Christ, his devotion to prayer, his commitment to the poor and perhaps above all by his courage to follow his heart.

The path of the heart is the golden way. Whether it is through poverty, silent prayer, giving alms and charity or all of it, it is through the heart we find Christ and live out his love. And the path of the heart is the path of Francis.

The pearl of great price for St Francis was embracing radical poverty. His joy was complete through it. - What is your pearl of great price? Have you taken hold of your pearl of great price and are you growing in love, expanding your heart?

Who are you meant to be? Are you living true to who you want to be?
Do attachments to the material hinder your true being to unfold, like it did for Francis? What do you need to give up to keep growing?

So many people today are not living true to what they really desire deepest down.

If we do not follow our heart, we suffer burnout and lethargy, joylessness and weariness of spirit.

Remember the response of Francis to the gospel:

"This is what I wish, this is what I seek, this is what I long to do with all my heart!"

What do you want? What moves your heart, fires you, delights you?

Go towards that, turn your face to it. Give it room in your life and your heart. Give it time and space.

This is what Francis did – this is what we must do so Christ may grow in us.

St Irenaeus said *"The glory of God is the glory of people fully alive."* Let us remember we are beautiful in the sight of God. So let us walk free, and open our hearts to life, for Christ walks with us into each new day. **Amen.**

Hans Christiansen