

Corona Season (4.10.20)
St Francis of Assisi

Ecclesiasticus 3.17-23
1 Corinthians 1.17-31
Luke 12. 22-34

FRANCIS OF ASSISI

St Francis is one of the most popular of saints, and the image that endures is his care for the natural world, and his communion with the animals and the birds. Were the world more Christian, Francis would have a wide following today. His example underlies Pope Francis' ministry, and this year he designated the period from the beginning of September to today, the Feast of St Francis, as the Season of Creation (something that I became aware of only recently). In earlier centuries Francis popularity would have rested more on the way his life was based most closely on that of Jesus.

Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant and he became a leader of society in Assisi. However, he always had compassion for the poor, and for lepers, and in time, moved by their plight he gave up his position and wealth in order to follow Jesus in the service of the poorest. His calling came in the semi-derelict church of St Damiano, where, while praying in front of the crucifix, he heard a voice saying, 'Go and repair my house, which you see is falling down.' Francis set about the task, selling a bale of his father's cloth to pay for the repairs. Prolonged conflict with his father followed, which ended with Francis dramatically renouncing his inheritance and divesting himself of his clothes. For him were fulfilled the words of Jesus about giving up mother and brothers for the sake of the Kingdom (*Matthew 10.37-39*), and it led to a life lived alone, wandering from place to place, begging in order to survive.

After two or three years Francis acquired a new family: seven disciples joined him and they began a communal life together, bound by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Thus began what was to become the world-wide Franciscan Community. From the outset their ministry was characterised by preaching tours. At first they met with a mixed reception, but it gradually became more favourable, especially for Francis personally. The parallel with Jesus' own ministry – walking from place to place, teaching the people, and calling them to a more devout life – is marked. This itinerant ministry distinguished the Friars (as they came to be called) from the Monks, who lived within a monastic enclosure. It was a source of conflict, because the monks looked down on the friars as not being a proper religious order.

However, Francis was a loyal son of the Church, and in time obtained papal approval for his new Order, and this brought many new recruits. Their life was one based on the deliberate choice of extreme poverty. They worked as labourers, supplementing their earnings by begging. They lived in simple wattle-and-daub huts, sleeping on the earth, without tables or chairs, and very few books. Their places of worship were modest and small. It seems strange to us today that such a life would draw men in their thousands, but it did! In something like twelve years the community had grown to 5000 friars, and had added the Second Order for women (some of whom are known as Poor Clares, taking their name from Francis' sister), and also the Third Order for lay people (known as Tertiaries) who followed Franciscan ideals, but remained with their families.

The appeal of such a life must be its simplicity, its joy in creation, and its closeness to the life of Jesus. So close was his identification

with his Master, that he received in his body the stigmata – the impression of the wounds of Christ. St Paul, similarly, had been marked in this way (*Galatians 6.17*), and like Paul, Francis was a living example of the same renunciation of everything in which he had taken pride – his inheritance, status and possessions – like Paul writing them off because of Christ, and desiring only to know him and the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings (*Philippians 3. 7, 10*).

There come times when the way of the world seems hopeless and leading nowhere; its values compromised, even baseless, demeaning rather than enhancing our humanity. Paul lived in such a time, describing it as without God and without hope (*Ephesians 2.12*). The times in which Francis lived were different, outwardly pious, but inwardly less so, and with the Church compromised by worldly values. Whatever the times, there is always something about a purely man-made approach to life and its utilitarian values that leave people unsatisfied, and looking for something more fulfilling. Francis' radical call met that need. He echoed Paul's words to the Corinthians: 'the message of the Cross is sheer folly to those on the way to destruction, but to us, who are on the way to salvation, it is the power of God. ... The folly of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God stronger than human strength.' (*I Cor 1.18, 25*)

The times in which we live show us yet again the folly of believing that human wisdom and human strength are sufficient to the challenges we face. Nowhere is this more evident – and more urgent – than in the environmental crisis. We see writ large in its effects the relevance of Jesus' words about the folly of setting our minds on material possessions alone. And although the Christian

message does not have the hold on popular minds that it did in Francis' day, and becoming part of a religious order is not seen as an appropriate personal response, we see something of the same rejection of materialistic values among many people, both young and old, and in the work of campaigning groups like Friends of the Earth. The Church, too, is part of this movement, seen at one level in Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato 'si*, and at another level in a myriad of local environmental initiatives and action groups.

Today, the spirituality that Francis offers us translates into a rejection of the values of consumerism and the embrace of the values of conservation. It is a spirituality for the times. His identification with Jesus led to him coming so close in spirit to the whole of creation that he saw all creatures as his brothers and sisters. His rejoicing in creation was the the inspiration for the Canticle of Brother Sun, upon which the hymn 'All Creatures Great and Small' is based. His spirituality offers us hope. The genuine always overcomes the counterfeit; truth always overcomes falsehood; humility always overcomes pride. Jesus promised that those, like Francis, whose hearts are pure shall see God, and in them we see his reflected glory.