

Homily 2nd October Creation and St Francis

Luke 12 :22-34

Galatians 6:14 -end

Genesis 1:24 -end

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The theme for Creation Season this year is Listen to the voice of Creation, pay attention to the signs of the times as they are shown to us in and through the Creation – it is not comfortable listening or watching. So what went wrong ? We read in Genesis that God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

We are still dealing with the outcomes of the Covid virus, seen by some as a product of our destructive interference in wild places, we are still recovering from the drought and the wild fires of the summer, and we are not yet recovering from the recent floods and storms which are not only worse than before, but increasingly and escalating-ly worse, as if the Creation itself is shouting louder and louder to try and get us to pay attention.

This week we will remember the anniversary of St Francis of Assisi, I will particularly, as it is the eve of the anniversary of my ordination day. So I have been much attracted to and influenced by St Francis, initially by his focus on joy and thanksgiving, and then by his call to simplicity of life and ultimately by his love for the Lord Jesus. (tell the story of a night of praying over and over ‘My God and my all’) He lived in difficult times especially of war and conflict, but he started his life happily as the well-off son of a cloth merchant who hoped his son would rise up the social scale or ‘go far’ as they say. But his life took a different path.

Following a vision of Christ from the cross in the Church in San Damiano, speaking to him and saying to him ‘Francis rebuild my Church which is everywhere in ruins’ his life changed. He became estranged from his father who could not understand at all. He went instead to literally repair the Church, and he begged for his food and for the materials he needed to build with. He was marking time really, whilst he worked out what God was calling him to do. Eventually he understood as Paul told the Galatians that ‘a new creation is everything!’ he understood that God’s Church is not limited to just buildings it is to be found wherever in Creation, God is worshipped.

He came to identify so strongly with Christ’s love for the world, that towards the end of his life he received the marks of the Crucifixion in his own body, and it sounds as if St Paul may have done so as well for he said, ‘I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body’. (but Paul may have meant the beatings he had received on his missionary journeys)

So one morning in February 1208, Francis was taking part in a Mass in the chapel of St. Mary of the Angels, near which he had built a hut. The Gospel of the day was the commissioning of the twelve disciples for mission from the book of Matthew.

The disciples were to go out in pairs and proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Francis was inspired almost at once to devote himself to a life of preaching that same gospel, and to a life of poverty, following those first disciples, travelling light, and trusting in God to provide. He took seriously the words in Luke 12

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.'

He got hold of a coarse woollen tunic, then worn by the poorest of peasants, he tied it around himself with a knotted rope and went about preaching, calling the people of the countryside to penitence, brotherly love, and peace.

His example attracted others. Within a year Francis had eleven followers. The brothers lived a simple life in the deserted leper hospital near Assisi; but they spent much of their time wandering in Umbria, preaching and teaching

This was just the beginning; many others came to join him, the church of the day was corrupt and unpopular and so was the government, he could have been an early revolutionary, but instead he supported the renewal of the Church by founding the Friars minor a religious order of mendicants, or begging and preaching wanderers, for men. For women he founded an enclosed order of nuns, the Poor Clares, and finally a Third Order for lay people, who remained in the community, raised families and produced food and so on.

His whole desire in life was to love as Jesus loved, with the same sacrificial offering of himself in God's service. He followed in Jesus' footsteps and took the gospels literally as the pattern for his life – 'Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' Francis took those words of scripture and many others and tried to live them out. It was a very hard life, and he was very hard on himself, did not take care of himself and gave his food and clothes away too often, and he died relatively young in 1226.

Francis set out to imitate Christ and literally carry out his work. This meant he had a real understanding of the Incarnation, of God present with and within all things, and a great reverence for the Eucharist. He preached: "Your God is of your flesh, He lives in your nearest neighbour, in every man, though today we would say in every person.

He and his followers celebrated and even venerated poverty, travelling lightly on the earth, which he said was the essential lifestyle for the members of the Friars Minor.

Francis believed that nature itself was the mirror of God, in the beauty and fruitfulness of the creation, we can see God's hand at work, and we can see what God is like – beautiful and fruitful. He also called all creatures his "brothers" and "sisters" as an indication of the significance of our relationships with one another and with the whole of God's creation. He understood the reverence and respect we are called to show for one another and for Creation.

His deep sense of brotherhood with the Creation, embraced all others, and he said that "he considered himself no friend of Christ if he did not cherish those for whom Christ died".

Francis preached the Christian doctrine that the world was created good and beautiful by God, remember 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good'. But now, he saw the world needs redemption, renewal and restoration, because of our activities, our human sin, those sins of abuse, waste, destruction, pollution and exploitation. Remember it was very good, with God's grace and help it might yet be restored.

As one who saw God reflected in nature. Francis was a great lover of nature; he would have had no difficulty in hearing the voice of Creation and the messages that we seem to have such difficulty noticing. He would be deeply grieved by the losses and extinctions, by the damage and lack of care.

He attempted peace making between Christians and Muslims in Egypt and the Holy land during the Fifth Crusade, because he realised the damage the wars were causing.

Francis had a wonderful sense of balance in his preaching and in his living and we see it clearly in the canticle of the Sun, where he moves from praise of God through the Sun through all Creation, on to aspects at the end of life, and he says

Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give forgive others for love of you,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living person can escape.

These are the words of a person who loves the Lord Jesus and who has a proper sense of perspective and a holistic healthy understanding of the whole of life, - who will, unlike us, do no harm to his brothers and sisters or to the planet.

As we saw last week, our very future on this planet depends on all of us learning restraint, on knowing and accepting when we have enough and in learning the new life and lifestyle of finding our joy in enough. We could do worse than to try and learn humility and simplicity, and how to tread lightly on the earth from St Francis.

When he died Francis is quoted as saying: I have done what was mine to do. May Christ teach you what is yours. Amen