

## Sermon 4 October 2020 St Francis of Assisi

### Ephesians 1:19-23

Today in our Christian calendar, we celebrate the life of St Francis of Assisi. In the past few years we have done this through holding a blessing of animals service in which we bless the pets of those who bring them to church for that purpose. We do that because St Francis is the patron saint of animals. We are unable to do that today but I do want to focus on a particular belief of St Francis and that is that we experience God when we reach out and help others.

We explored this recently when we observed the World Vision Matthew 25 Challenge. We looked at the passage in Matthew 25, which ends with the words, *'I assure you, when you did it for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.'* I told the story of Martin the shoemaker who realised that he met Christ in the form of the people he helped throughout the day. This passage from Matthew makes this point probably better than any other passage in the Bible but as we have already examined that passage, I have chosen the passage we heard from Ephesians. I chose that really for the last verse, which reads, *'And the church is his body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with his presence.'*

Service to the needy was of paramount importance to St Francis. Not only did he believe that you experienced something of God when you helped the needy, he also believed that this was a form of worship. Central to this belief is the view that God is part of every one of us, so that when we reach out to anyone, we are reaching out to God. This is precisely what Paul is saying – *Christ fills all things everywhere with his presence.* It is an interesting viewpoint and something we have touched upon more than once in recent homilies.

You might remember that St Francis came to this realisation through his experience with a leper. He had always been repulsed by lepers but on this occasion he dismounted his horse, embraced and kissed the leper. On remounting his horse, he turned to farewell the leper only to find that he had disappeared into thin air. He realised that in embracing the leper he had in fact embraced Christ.

I have just begun reading a very interesting book, entitled *'The Universal Christ'* by Richard Rohr. The premise for this book is that Christ is present in all creation, and especially in all humanity. The more I think about it, the more it makes sense to me. I believe there are three simple steps leading to this conclusion.

Firstly, I believe we are all children of God, created by God and that the Spirit of God dwells within us; secondly, I believe that God is manifested in the person of Christ, who now of course exists as a Spirit; so therefore thirdly, the Spirit of Christ dwells within each and every one of us.

Paul again makes this point in his letter to the Colossians. *'For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and by him God reconciled everything to himself. Christ has brought you into the very presence of God.'* Colossians 1:20,22. Now this should make a difference

as to how I treat absolutely everyone, no matter whom they might be. If I believe that Christ is part of them, I would like to think my attitude and approach would be one of respect and caring. I think this also reinforces the point that we experience something of God when we care for another.

You might have heard the story of the pastor of a large inner-city congregation that established a soup kitchen in the basement of his church to help feed the many poor and homeless who occupied that part of the city. These needy folk flocked to the church day in and day out to get the help they needed to survive.

Over time, many of these people began to wander into the 11.00am Sunday service at the church. The congregation who attended this service were largely upper-middle-class folk and many of them felt a little uncomfortable with their visitors who were on a different social level to them. Eventually, one of the church leaders took the pastor aside and asked him, 'Is it really necessary for these people to worship with us? Couldn't we provide a special service just for them?'

The pastor answered, 'Well, I think everybody should have the chance to meet Jesus face to face.' 'Of course,' answered the deacon, 'everybody should have a chance to meet Jesus. I think they should have the same opportunities to meet Jesus face to face as we all do.'

The pastor shot back, 'I'm not talking about them! I'm talking about you!'

The point the pastor was obviously making was that in embracing their visitors from the soup kitchen, they were embracing Jesus.

I refer back to the verse from our reading from Ephesians in which Paul states that the church is God's body. I say again, as a church we must do everything we can to ensure we are as inclusive as we possibly can. I finish with a word from Jesus himself, '*My prayer for all is that they will be one.*' John 17:21. I think that says it all.

Rev Warner Wilder