

Sermon 6 October 2024 St Francis of Assisi

Ephesians 1:19-23 Matthew 25:31-40

On Friday we celebrated the life of St Francis of Assisi in our church calendar. Today, I would like to focus on St Francis. I do that because it is relevant in terms of our calendar but also because he is my favourite saint, and I do hope the reason for that will become apparent over the next few minutes.

Francis was born in 1181, the son of a successful cloth merchant in Assisi, Italy. As a young man he worked in the family business and at the same time, he took an active part in the social life of the city. In fact, he was a party animal.

In 1202 he was captured during fighting between Assisi and neighbouring Perugia. He spent almost two years in prison. The suffering he saw during the fighting and then his stay in prison caused him to think seriously about the meaning and purpose of life. He returned to Assisi but his life was changing. He was becoming dissatisfied with his worldly existence. He still lived at home amidst extravagant wealth but instead of indulging he started to give his wealth away to the poor, even though it really belonged to his father. He became a man of prayer.

On a pilgrimage to Rome, he was moved by compassion for the beggars he saw there. One day, he exchanged his clothes with one of them and spent a day begging himself. The experience deeply affected him. He returned to Assisi, had a blazing row with his father whom, along with all his wealth, he renounced.

He now devoted his life to rebuilding churches and ministering to the poor. He attempted to pattern his own life on that of Christ, preaching and healing the sick. He soon attracted many followers and in 1209 he founded the Order of St Francis. He died in 1226 and two years later he was canonized as a saint.

An interesting note – in 1224, two years before he died, Francis received a vision that left him with the stigmata of Christ. These are marks which resemble the wounds Jesus suffered when he was crucified, on his hands and his feet. This was the first recorded instance of stigmata.

So that is a short biography. I want now to focus on a particular belief of St Francis, and that is that we experience God when we reach out to others. I refer to our gospel reading, a well-known passage which we have explored before and it makes this very point. I remind you of the last verse in which the king, in response to the question, 'When was it that we saw you hungry and fed you?' etc, said, *'Truly I tell you, just as you did it for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me.'* In telling this story, Jesus is making it quite clear that God dwells in each and every one of us and so when we help anyone, we help God. So it becomes an experience of God.

Service to the needy was of paramount importance to St Francis. Not only did he believe that you experience 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 each out to anyone, we are reaching out to God. this is precisely what Paul is saying in our first reading: *'Christ fills all things everywhere with his presence.'*

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 when he came across a leper, he dismounted from 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.

Richard Rohr wrote a very interesting book, entitled 'The Universal Christ.' The premise of 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 look at it his way. Firstly, I believe we are all children of God, created by God and the Spirit of God dwells within us. Secondly, I believe that God is manifested in the person of Christ (basic Christian belief!). 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.

I remind you of the story of the pastor of a large inner-city church that established a soup kitchen in the basement of the church to help feed the many poor and homeless who occupied that part of the city. These needy folk flocked to the church every day to get the help they needed to survive.

Over time, many of these people began to wander into the 11.00am service. The congregation who attended this service were largely well-to-do 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 a chance to meet Jesus face to face.' 'Of course,' replied 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: *'God has made Jesus the head over all things for the church, which is his body.'* I say again, as a church we must do everything we can to ensure we are as inclusive as we possibly can, and we can do that on more than one level. In his excellent book, 'Dream with Me,' John Perkins refers to a community church set up in a relatively poor suburb of Chicago in the 1980s. The intent of the church, the Lawndale Community Church, was to be a community that takes care of the whole person – body, mind and spirit. And that's just what they did. They set up what they called a Christian Health Centre as part of the church. This facility sees more than 150,000 people each year.

Now we need to make sure we are not swayed or too focussed on numbers, but those numbers do tell a very important story. You see, that church very much became a part of its local community. That has to be our intent. I believe our ministry must be holistic and relevant to the everyday lives and needs of the community around us. St Francis was all about meeting the needs of people. That is why he is my favourite saint. We need to follow in his footsteps. If we can do that, we have a chance of growing God's church, which surely must be an aspiration, an objective.