

## St Francis. 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2009

### Getting Real about St Francis: what was he really on about and how can he speak to us today?

“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. ....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.” (*Luke 12:33-34*)

Today’s Gospel passage is one of those classics –beautiful images of splendidly arrayed flowers and birds – God has so beautifully provided for them, so how much more will he provide for us? Strive for his kingdom, put God first and make his way your priority and....trust. God will take of us. It’s one of those passages that give us hope and strength in the face of life’s uncertainties.

As a gospel text for the Feast Day of St Francis, how might we read it? Given the popular understanding of St Francis, the saint known for his great affinity with creation, it’s likely that we would read this as an affirmation of the spirituality St Francis is heralded for: God’s divine and providential love displayed in and through all creation.

But here’s the problem. History gives us two images of St Francis. There’s that popular image, the St Francis of peace and nature, of simplistic living, who himself embraced poverty. This St Francis has evolved over the centuries as the saint of ecology and the interconnectedness of all creation. And there’s the other St Francis – original and medieval, severe and ascetic, taking the Bible literally, passionately driven by a desire to live as Christ did, and driving others to do the same. This St Francis would direct us to selling our possessions, getting rid of anything that diverts our attention from entrusting ourselves completely to God’s providing.

Let’s start by getting the historical record straight. Briefly. In this medieval time –the twelfth and thirteenth centuries - the church had grown fat with its greed for riches, and there was a great divide between the wealth of the church and the poverty of ordinary people. The early biographies of Francis –written within a few decades of his death in 1226 – show us a Francis who reacted to the materialism of the Church, and over a period of time was captivated and converted by the simple assertions of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. He took these literally, and required his followers to do likewise – where Jesus said: “sell all your possessions” – Francis did; “give to the poor” – he gave everything he had; ‘do not look back to hang onto your family’ –he renounced his family; “be a servant of others” – he extended himself in acts of love and charity. And always, he called for penance – confession and repentance. In every way he purposed to imitate Christ. His Rule of Life – the vows of the Order he established - centred on obedience, humility, poverty and chastity; no possessions, no handling of money. One thirteenth century biography of Francis and his brothers in faith, records: “For the more they were separated from the world, the more they were united to God. As they advanced on the way of the cross and the paths of justice, they cleared all hindrances from the narrow path of penance and of the observance of the gospel”<sup>i</sup>

But what happened after Francis’ death, was a move by his successors, and the Church, to soften things. As the numbers of brothers increased, and as the Order became more organised, his early Rule of poverty, humility and obedience was watered down; the Order

acquired possessions, espoused a more moderate poverty and pursued papal favours. The Order split into factions – and these factions remain today –with some (the Capuchins) adhering more closely to the original Rule. The Franciscans today still live their lives focused on God through a life of service and poverty, but without the stringent deprivations of Francis' early rule.

Over time, what became emphasised in secular understanding were the legends about his communing with nature. Songs and poetry of later times, even ones composed in the last century, like the one we'll sing later- "Make me a channel of your Peace"- were attributed to him, as the sentiments in them expressed what people had come to believe was the heart of his message: *community, compassion, peacemaking, and reverence for creation*. It's not that Francis didn't espouse these – he did; but these values were secondary, embedded in his larger and more strident message of strict adherence to the obedience and self-emptying of Jesus' way of life. In this way of life, nothing –literally nothing –no possessions, no affections, no vanity or pride, no status or family – was allowed to be held onto, lest it distracted from a complete abandonment to the way of Christ.

So that's the history –at least a potted version, anyway. It's not difficult to see why Francis' early rule of life and his lifestyle of poverty was softened and readjusted to suit a medieval church that enjoyed its possessions; and a church that perhaps didn't want to be reminded of the gap between how it lived its life and the life of Christ himself. And even after that, the medieval Francis has had the capacity to make the Church and Christians quite uncomfortable. It's no wonder Francis has been sanitised and sentimentalised over the centuries.

But let's turn to ourselves. What would the original Francis' calling look like in this century? By and large, he's become the icon for the environmentalist movement; but this later version of Francis is more constructed out of his secondary message of living in peace and harmony with each other and all creation. This is, of course, not the essence or heart of the medieval Francis, with his primary call to humility, poverty and obedience.. As much as the world needs the Franciscan message of peace and harmony, let's not reduce Francis to just being an environmental crusader or ecological warrior.

Think about where you fit personally into all this. Which Francis would you follow? Just the Francis rejoicing in the created world and its creator? Or adding a step further in Francis' spirituality—allowing yourself to live as if every human person is truly equal in the sight of God –embracing everyone as brother, sister, regardless of race, creed, sin or any of the labels and distinctions the worlds puts on people?

But let's go further – let's find a stronger contemporary message in that medieval Francis who passionately embraced poverty, humility and obedience. In this day and age, this Francis is not so politically correct; in fact he's quite counter-cultural. This Francis calls us to trust fully in God for all our material needs, calls us to break our attachment to possessions and to identify ourselves with the poor and disadvantaged. This Francis tells us that following Jesus isn't just about social justice and the economics of poverty, but is about sharing his life, forgoing worldly security for the treasures of his kingdom. This is the Francis most truly aligned with the life of Christ, who would echo Paul's words from Galatians; "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (6:14)

As one biographer puts it: “in a secular age, when talk of God is awkward or rigidly privatised, stands the deeply pious Francis, whose God-intoxication drove everything he did. In a materialistic world, where the meaning and measure of life is counted by the things we buy and the experiences we enjoy, the barefoot, raggedly robed Francis calls us to simplicity and poverty. In cultures drowning in rampant individualism, in which we balk at submitting to anything outside the self, Francis tells us to abandon our lives in complete obedience to something bigger than ourselves. In short, Francis would instil in us, as he tried to instil in his contemporaries, profound gratitude and humility –towards God, our world and even the flawed institutions that have nurtured us.”<sup>ii</sup>

Let’s give Francis himself the last word: “blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God. A man is really clean of heart when he has no time for the things of this world but is always searching for the things of heaven, never failing to keep God before his eyes and always adoring him with a pure heart and soul”. <sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> From ‘The Legend of the Three Companions’, reported in Mark Galli, *Francis of Assisi and His World*, Oxford, Lion Publishing, 2002, p.71.

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*, p.182.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Admonitions XVI*