

## St Francis

For many years I was a tutor and marker of a theological course run by TEE College which had the delightful name *Growing Spiritually, Thinking Theologically*. This course linked spirituality of well-known saints or movements with theological doctrines. Being a head person, not a heart person I always thought the name of the course should be the other way around – because we are thinking about Doctrines, we become more spiritual. But I suppose for most people it is because they are growing spiritually, they start to think more theologically. But that is by-the-by, what is important for our celebrations today is that St Francis of Assisi was one of the saints whose spirituality had to be studied and from his spirituality the College led the students into the study of the Doctrine of Creation.

September is the month where the Church asks us to look at creation and I suppose celebrating St Francis on his official feast day, the 5 October is highly appropriate after a month of exploring our attitudes to God's creation. The idea of a doctrine of creation is a fairly new concept. We are used to many 'ologies' when dealing with theology and doctrines. For example, we have soteriology dealing with salvation, Christology dealing with our understanding of Christ, Pneumatology dealing with the Holy Spirit and even anthropology dealing with humankind's relationship with God. In the Anglican Communion, we have five marks of mission. Until quite recently it was the Four marks of Mission which were

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation

Then the fifth Mark of Mission was added

- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

The question arises, "Why is St Francis linked so closely to Creation and the Doctrine of Creation?" Perhaps the St Francis stained-glass window gives us a clue. We see our blessed patron saint standing among the animals, both domestic and wild. For this we can blame St Bonaventure who wrote a book entitled "The Little Flowers of St Francis" which tell of episodes in Francis's life. Two stand out. The first is the story of St Francis preaching to the Birds in the trees. His sermon begins: *My little sisters, the birds, much bounden are ye unto God, your Creator, and always in every place ought ye to praise Him, for that He hath given you liberty to fly about everywhere...* The second story from the Little Flowers is St Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio. The wolf was terrorising the Umbrian city of Gubbio until it was tamed by Francis acting on behalf of God. But Francis's Spirituality offers so much more than just animal connections and even more than a doctrine of creation.

Francis was preaching to those birds because he had made Jesus the centre of his life and he wanted to share the joy of this fact with others so they could also experience the joy of being a child of God – whether they were human, animal, fish or bird. The important thing is not that he spoke to animals like a 13<sup>th</sup> Century Dr Dolittle, but that he loved God, who had created him and all animals and all things and God had sent God's son to rescue us all from our normal wicked human nature. Francis modelled everything on Jesus. He was the walking talking embodiment of those plastic wrist bands that were popular in the 1980s and 90s with the initials WWJD on them. Remember them? What Would Jesus Do? When we were in a moral dilemma or having a twinge of conscience we would grip the band and ask WWJD – What Would Jesus Do. St Francis **did** do what Jesus would have done!

Our New Testament Reading from Paul's Letter to the Galatians is a beautiful summary of the spirituality and characteristics of Francis. Five verses long, yet it says it all. Verse 14: *<sup>14</sup>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.* Francis never boasted about who he was, what he had done or his close relationship with God through Jesus Christ. *The world has been crucified to me*, says Paul and Francis would have agreed. He gave up the fine clothes and houses his father had in order to place upon himself the rough cloth of a monk's habit with a simple rope as belt. I don't know if any of you ever saw the Franco Zeffirelli's movie – *Brother Sun and Sister Moon* telling the Francis life story. It came out in the 1970s and there was a scene where Francis is verbally attacked by his father for bringing the family into disrepute by his strange behaviour and Francis decides to disconnect himself from his father and the family and so he strips naked and walks away from his rich merchant father towards the Bishop of Assisi and the Church. *The world has been crucified to me*

<sup>15</sup>*For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but what counts is the new creation!* For Francis, all people are welcome to follow Christ by living their lives as Christ lived his. Like Paul who tell us that both Jews and Gentiles were as important, so too, Francis welcomed all who loved Jesus. Another scene from the movie, *Brother Sun and Sister Moon* – showed other young men following Francis in the Franciscan order helping with the harvesting of grain in spite of the farmer’s disapproval of what he thought was “the Church with all its power and glory and money-grabbing” getting involved. But those Franciscan monks weren’t locked up in a monastery but out in the world, being poor among the poor and sharing their struggle.

For Francis, all creation is God-created and we who follow Christ will see it as a new creation. We will have a different relationship with it. Francis himself wrote *The Canticle of the Sun*, a wonderful poem in praise of God’s creation. [9:30- We sang a version of it as our Introit hymn this morning. Yes, I know even with three verses omitted it was long but I hope that you will read those omitted verses and appreciate the all-encompassing nature of Francis’s praise of Creation.] [It appears at hymn 105 in our red hymn book – read it and appreciate the all-encompassing nature of Francis’s praise of Creation]

Our Galatian reading continues: <sup>16</sup> *Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.* There is a wonderful story of Francis and the sultan. In 1219 St. Francis accompanied the crusader armies to Egypt, during the Fifth Crusade. He wanted to speak peacefully with Muslim people about Christianity, even if it meant dying as a martyr. After the defeat of the Crusader armies, he crossed the battle line, was arrested and taken to the sultan, Malek al-Kamil. After an initial attempt by Francis and the sultan to convert each other, both quickly realized that the other already knew and loved God. Francis remained with the Sultan for twenty days, discussing prayer and the mystical life. When Francis left, the Sultan gave him an ivory trumpet, which is still preserved in the crypt of the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. This encounter is a paradigm for interfaith dialog in our time. Despite differences in religion, people of prayer can find common ground in their experiences of God and seeking peace and mercy between them.

Paul continues: *17 From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.* Two years before Francis died, at the age of forty-two he went off to a lonely mountain called Mount Alvernia, to prepare himself by forty days of fasting and prayer for the feast of St Michael and All Angels whose feast day is September 29. On the feast of the Holy Cross, the 14 September, Francis received in his hands, feet and side the sacred wounds which Jesus had received at his passion. The wounds stayed in his hands, feet and side, and continually bled for more than two years, until he died in 1226. *I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.*

Finally, Paul says: *May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.* Grace – what is grace? It is a gift freely given and undeserved by the receiver. The greatest gift Jesus gave us was himself in the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine. For Francis, the Eucharist was the primary way in which he saw Christ’s continuing Incarnation in the world. Francis held the sacrament in great veneration, yet it was not something to be housed in Aumbries in Churches but to be taken out into the world by priests and lay ministers to be shared with those who could not get to church. Francis wanted Christ to be present for everyone, but not only in the Eucharist, also in some tangible way for all - the educated and the non-educated. Do you have a Nativity scene among your Christmas decoration which you set up each year? Most Parish churches do, and it becomes for some not a mere decoration but a place of veneration, a place to give thanks on our knees for the incarnation, a tangible reminder of this wonderfully generous act of grace. And who was the first person to construct such a tangible image of grace? St Francis who after visiting Bethlehem, returned to Italy and constructed the first Nativity Scene in a cave near the town of Greccio. Francis wanted us all to experience, to know and to love the Lord Jesus.

Francis still acts as an example for us today. One of your former Rectors, Fr Nolan, was a tertiary of the Franciscan order because I’m sure he wanted to know Jesus more clearly, follow him more nearly and love him more dearly. This example of Francis offers us a choice – do we follow Jesus with humility, seek peace and mercy for all, creating a new creation through his grace or do we do what that young man Jesus spoke to in the Gospel today? In answer to question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus offered that man a list of things. The young man said he had done all those and so Jesus gave him a final choice – not an easy one agreed, but one that Francis did with alacrity. *Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.* Choice. You too have a choice – maybe not the same as that young man or of Francis but you must make a choice to follow Jesus as Francis did or will your face fall and will you go away sadly?