

Francis of Assisi
Year C - 2/10/2016

Genesis 2: 4-9a, 19-22
Psalm 150
Romans 8: 18-27
Matthew 6:25-33

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It is a wonderful feast day that we celebrate today - that of St. Francis. Francis was born in Assisi in central Italy around the year 1182. He was baptised Giovanni but given the name Francesco by his father, a cloth merchant who traded in France and had married a French wife. There was an expectation that he would eventually take over his father's business but Francis had a rebellious youth and a difficult relationship with his father. After being imprisoned following capture whilst at war with the local city of Perugia, he returned a changed man.

He took to caring for disused churches and for the poor, particularly those suffering from leprosy. Others joined him and he prepared a simple, gospel-based Rule for them all to live by. As the Order grew, it witnessed to Christ through preaching the gospel of repentance, emphasising the poverty of Christ as an example for his followers.

Many of the stories that surround the life of St. Francis deal with his love for animals. Perhaps the most famous incident that illustrates the Saint's humility towards nature is recounted in the "Fioretti" ("Little Flowers"), a collection of legends and folklore that sprang up after the Saint's death. It is said that, one day, while Francis was travelling with some companions, they happened upon a place in the road where birds filled the trees on either side. Francis told his companions to "wait for me while I go to preach to my sisters the birds."

The birds surrounded him, intrigued by the power of his voice, and not one of them flew away. At his death, on the evening of 3 October 1226, his Order had spread throughout western Christendom.

Our readings this morning reflect the connection that is often made between St. Francis, and creation. And it is no coincidence that his Feast (on the 1st Sunday of October each year) brings to a close the focus on the month of Creation, which is often observed throughout September - that month of new life and growth, as Spring begins here in the southern hemisphere.

And so we hear today from the book of Genesis, sometimes known as the Book of Creation, which gives us the distinctly God-centred account of the creation of the earth - that narrative which points ultimately to a truth that is far deeper than just the words used to describe the event.

And St. Paul, in his letter to the early church in Rome, describes how the whole creation, not just humanity, waits with eagerness for the reign of God to come - that time when we will see for ourselves how the whole created order comes together to demonstrate the perfection of its Creator.

But a reflection on Francis ought to point to more than just his love of creation - and for me, what I love about the legend of Francis is actually how often he didn't get it right the first time - and that is a tremendous comfort to me, I can tell you!!

For example, when Francis was a very young man--that is, before he really had any inkling of the vocation God had in store for him--he thought he might like very much to be a knight. At the time, his home city of Assisi was engaged in one of its many wars with the neighboring city of Perugia, and for a middle-class merchant to have his son fighting for the city outfitted as if he were a lord, would have had some appeal to Francis' father. So he brought him the armor, swords, lances, gowns and horse that would be required.

But Francis noticed that among the company there was an impoverished nobleman who had no armor, horse, etc. So Francis give his entire outfit away, and marched off to Perugia unarmed. Needless to say, the encounter proved disastrous for Francis, and he was captured and imprisoned.

When he was finally ransomed, he was ill with a high fever. If Jesus had wanted him to be a knight, Francis reasoned, something was clearly going wrong. Perhaps, like a fool, he had gotten the message wrong. He continued to search. What could it mean to be Jesus' knightly champion?

Later in his life, after he had renounced his family, and gone off to live the life of a hermit, he had one of the more remarkable experiences in what was to be a most remarkable life. While praying one day before the crucifix in the ruined church of San Damiano, the figure of Jesus came to life and spoke to him saying, "Francis, rebuild my church, which, as you see, is falling down."

Francis looked around him and saw that, indeed, the church of San Damiano was falling down. He immediately began putting stone on stone, rebuilding the church. The people of Assisi thought he was a fool. Slowly, again, he began to understand that he'd gotten it wrong. It wasn't until much later in his life that he understood that Jesus had meant for Francis to rebuild his Church, with a capital "C".

And when he understood that, perhaps he also began to understand what it might be to be Jesus' knightly champion.

So what are we to make of this famous saint? He has been called "the Other Jesus" by some. He is revered and loved universally, by Christians and non-Christians alike. And yet, he didn't seem to Get it Right.

Perhaps this is what Jesus is talking about when he suggests that the foolish and unlearned may know something that the wise and learned don't know. Perhaps certainty and Being Right are not what Jesus wants from our lives.

Maybe Saint Francis shows us something completely different, something that looks more like perseverance in the face of uncertainty. Maybe the lesson I can learn from Saint Francis is the lesson that faithfulness is more valuable than Being Right; that humility and unknowing are a more appropriate response to God than certainty and knowledge.

Perhaps abandoning the pride of self may be the way to begin to understand God. Or, in the words of Saint Francis' famous prayer, maybe it actually really is, that “in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

In the name of God. Amen.