

Sermon for 6.10.19

Last Sunday afternoon at St Matthews we held the blessing of the pet's service. It was a lovely service – the church was host to many dogs and cats and their devoted owners.

There were no accidents and there was no fighting. I must say it was a very well behaved crowd.

We sang, we prayed, we admired each other's pets, and I blessed the animals. It was a delight to be there.

We hold this service around this time on a day close to the 4th October when we commemorate St Francis of Assisi. Today I am going to talk about St Francis because Friday the 4th is his Feast Day, and because he epitomises the message of the gospel today - about the power of faith and the power of humility. The nature of his character also fits with the messages in Habakkuk, "There is a vision that speaks of the end and does not lie" and "The righteous live by their faith."

There is no better disciple, I believe, who encapsulates these profound qualities and truths like St Francis does. His story is a wonderful one about a very humble man who went through several faith stages from his youth into his adulthood and eventually to his total conversion to a life in Christ.

St Francis was the founder of the Franciscan orders of the Friars Minor, the women's order of the Poor Clare's and the Lay Third Order.

Both he and St Catherine of Siena are the patron saints of Italy and in 1997 Pope John Paul 11 recognised Francis as the patron saint of Ecology.

St Francis was born 1181/82 to a wealthy family. His father was a silk merchant and Francis grew up in comfort. In his young adulthood his exuberant love of life and his general spirit of worldliness made him a recognised leader of the young men of the town.

He was also a soldier and after fighting in a war between Assisi and Perugia, was held prisoner for almost a year. On his release fell seriously ill. Upon his recovery he had a vision that told him to return to Assisi and await God's call. He obeyed the vision and dedicated himself to solitude and prayer so that he might know what God was calling him to.

Francis had several spiritual episodes that contributed to his conversion to the apostolic life, however, the real turning point for Francis, according to his biographer, Thomas of Celano, occurred at the ruined chapel of San Damiano outside the gate of Assisi when Francis heard the crucifix above the altar command him: *Go, Francis, and repair my house which, as you see, is well-nigh in ruins.*

Taking this literally, Francis hurried home, gathered some fine cloth from his father's shop, and rode off to a nearby town where he sold both cloth and horse. This of course didn't bode well with his father who took him before the bishop of Assisi. There in front of them all he peeled off his garments and returned them to his father.

He renounced worldly goods and family ties to embrace a life of poverty. He repaired the church of San Damiano, refurbished a chapel dedicated to St Peter, and then restored the now-famous little chapel of St Mary of the Angels on the plain below Assisi.

It was in St Mary's that Jesus words in Matthews gospel about preaching the kingdom of God in the community, taking no provisions but only dependence upon God entered his heart and soul. According to Thomas of Celano, this was the decisive moment for Francis, who declared that this way of life is what he was called to do. He then removed his shoes, discarded his staff, put on a rough tunic, and began to preach repentance.

Probably no one in history has set out as seriously as did Francis to imitate the life of Jesus Christ and to carry out so literally Christ's work in Christ's own way.

His love of Christ was seen clearly in his veneration for the Eucharist (the body and blood of Christ). His love of Christ was the foundation upon which his very being and all that poured forth from his being, stood.

Francis considered all nature as the mirror of God.

He called all creatures his "brothers" and "sisters," and preached to the birds, squirrels and other creatures. In his "Canticle of the Creatures" he referred to "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon," the wind and water, and even "Sister Death."

Francis was determined to bring the Gospel to all of God's creatures. In 1219, he went to Egypt, where the crusaders were besieging Damietta. He went into the Muslim camp and preached to the sultan al-Kamil who was impressed by him and gave him permission (it is said) to visit the sacred places in the Holy Land.¹

At Christmastide in 1223, Francis participated in an important ceremony when he celebrated the birth Jesus by recreating the manger of Bethlehem at a church in Italy, and thus began the birth of the tradition of the nativity scene each Christmas.

In the summer of 1224, while on retreat as he prayed he beheld a figure coming toward him from the heavens. As it stood above him, he saw that it was a man and yet a Seraph with six wings; his arms were extended and his feet conjoined, and his body was fixed to a cross. Two wings were raised above his head, two were extended as in flight, and two covered the whole body. The face was beautiful beyond all earthly beauty, and it smiled gently upon Francis.

Pondering what this vision might mean, he finally understood that by God's providence he would be made like to the crucified Christ not by a bodily martyrdom but by conformity in mind and heart. Then as the vision disappeared, it left not only a greater ardour of love in the inner man but no less marvellously marked him outwardly with the stigmata of the Crucified. Such was his great humility, for the remainder of his life, Francis took the greatest care to hide the stigmata.²

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Francis-of-Assisi>
Accessed 4.10.19

² *ibid*

Francis lived two years after it appeared, when almost totally blind he was brought back to Assisi from the east, where he died. Very soon after his death Francis was canonized and a Basilica was built in Assisi in his honour.

I believe it is good to hear about the saints, not so that we can compare ourselves to them or feel less adequate, but rather to embrace them and know how they lived their lives in the way of Christ revealing mysteries that we can feed on in our own lives of faith.

St Francis was an extraordinary man of great faith and humility whose life witnessed to the gospel of Christ. In the righteousness of his faith he understood and accepted the meaning of his visions and accepted their reality.

On my mystic's pilgrimage in 2017, we visited Assisi and also the retreat in the mountains outside Assisi where St Francis spent some of his time. The area where he lived was very small. One needed to bend the head to enter all areas. In this confined space there was a slab of rock – flat, small (for he wasn't a tall man) where he slept.

Everything was sparse – small windows carved in the rock let in the light – nothing extra was there – yet even in the coldness of the rock there was the warmth of holiness. The very holy man St Francis had lived there. We give thanks for this blessed man and for his witness to the Christ in the lessons that we still learn from him today.

The Lord be with you.