

Homily for the Feast of St Francis of Assisi

Today we celebrate the feast of Francis of Assisi, the radical reformer of the 13th century, although in our time he is honoured principally for his love for creation.

His 13th century context was one of radical change. It was the time of the rise of early capitalism in Europe. City life was reviving, after many centuries of stagnation after the fall of the Roman Empire. Francis came from a wealthy Italian family since his father was a merchant. His baptismal name was John, and “Francis” was his nickname because he liked to wear stylish clothes from France.

The Church was in the midst of the renewal movement known as the *vita apostolica*. People wished to live the Christian life with the same intensity as it had been lived by the early Christians. Laity especially desired good preaching (sound familiar?) and people would follow dynamic preachers such as St Peter Damian from town to town.

Sometimes the readings of the day do not fit well with the feast day of an important saint. But today’s readings are linked with the spirit of the life of Francis.

The prophet Jonah was told by God to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, a city in Assyria which today is Iraq. We don’t know what their particular sins and failings were but probably they had broken most of the Ten Commandments. Jonah’s preaching was very effective and they fasted and repented. There is no mention in Assyrian history or biblical history of this conversion. But the story (which is what the book of Jonah is) shows us that God forgives if people repent.

Francis too was called to preach to the people of his time. One day while praying in the church of San Damiano he experienced Christ speaking to him from the cross and telling him to “rebuild my church”. Francis looked around and saw that the church building needed many repairs so he found rocks and stone and set to work. But he had misunderstood his call; Christ was calling him to re-build the Church, the Body of Christ, by preaching. This he began to do, calling people to repentance, to poverty (in opposition to the desire for wealth in his time) and prayer. People began to follow him in great numbers—the most important of whom was a young woman, Clare of Assisi (who wanted to preach with Francis but Church authorities insisted she had to live a cloistered life) and so the Franciscan movement was born.

There is a parallel in Francis’s life with the call of Jonah to preach to the Assyrians, people outside the Covenant. In 1219 during the Fifth Crusade Francis and a few followers travelled to Damietta in Egypt to meet with the Sultan of Egypt, Malik-al-Kamil. He hoped to convert him which did not happen. But he and the Sultan became close friends. Francis had approached the Sultan in peace, not war. Because of Francis’ initiative, Franciscans and many Muslims have had close personal ties to this day. In our era, when often there is much emotion between Christians and Muslims, Francis shows us a peaceful way of dialogue.

The Gospel from Luke is the familiar story of Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary. His words to Mary that she “has chosen the better part” have often been interpreted to mean that prayer is more important than active service. But there are other ways of understanding this text to show that there is a unity between contemplation and action, not a hierarchy of the two.

Francis was a person of deep prayer and radical conformity to Christ, which is seen in the stigmata—the wounds of Christ—on his body. Francis believed that the most important way to preach was to witness to the Gospel by the way one lived. He used to tell his followers, “Preach the Gospel with your life; if necessary, use words.”

Francis’s life shows many dimensions which are important for us as 21st century disciples. The Franciscan family with all of its branches has lived the way of Francis for over 800 years. His protest against wealth is as relevant as it was in his day since our world is overwhelmed by greed. His love for all of creation has made him the patron saint of ecology. This witness is so needed in our world which is on the brink of ecological chaos thanks to global warming. His respectful dialogue with the Sultan of Egypt models inter-religious dialogue today.

Francis lived 800 years ago and his world and ours are profoundly different. But we can make many connections. He lived in the time of the *vita apostolica*; we live in the Church of the continuing renewal of Vatican II. He was a layman (later a deacon); he began to preach as a lay person. Vatican II emphasised lay ministry as indispensable in the life of the Church. His life shows us the unity of prayer and action. His critique of the economic injustice of his time through preaching poverty challenges us today to denounce injustice and oppression and build structures of equity and peace. In his day Christians waged war on the Muslims in the Holy Land in the Crusades; these warlike attitudes toward Muslims are still found amongst some Christians today. But Francis’s witness of peaceful dialogue with the Sultan gives us a very relevant model of dialogue. And as the earth, our only home, becomes ever more a planet in peril, his love for all of creation impels us to action to care for our home.

St Francis of Assisi, pray for us.

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