

Poverty & Humility

a sermon preached on the

Feast of Francis

7 October 2007

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by The Reverend Jim McKenna

deacon of St Luke's & Chaplain to Bishopspark

Lection: Matthew 11:25-30

Jesus said: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Saint Francis in his simple wisdom, saw poverty and humility as twins. We are absolutely dependent on God for everything - "That is Humility." And God will provide them - "That is poverty." We are nothing without God - "That is humility." We want nothing but God - "That is poverty." As creatures we are poor before God - "That is both poverty and humility." Humility is a virtue whereby we realise and act according to our nothingness apart from God and our complete dependence upon God.

Jesus began His sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes. He began with: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." For me this has two meanings: Firstly, how happy are they who are free because of their spirit of gospel poverty. Secondly, how happy are they who admit that they are absolutely poor before God, and see everything as a gift from God. Nothing can exist without God. Our hearts will not beat another beat, our next breath will not be drawn unless God keeps on maintaining our lives.

Therefore humility is a deed and simple virtue, it acknowledges our absolute nothingness and our complete dependence on God. Scientists and many other proud human beings find it very difficult to believe this basic truth of all life. Humility in this sense was in Christ. His human nature was as dependent on God as we are. Christ is our model in humility.

One of the tragedies of life is the lack of a sense of self worth that afflicts many people. They can feel insecure; how can anyone love them since they feel that they are not worth loving? How can they love others since they feel that they have nothing to give? How can they believe that others really love them since they are nothing? This attitude does not reflect humility.

Anyone who is truly humble before God has heard the good news that "God" has made us something – His children – He loves us – and has given us the gift of loving ourselves and others. The opposite to humility is pride. It says: - I am somebody all by myself. I am independent. I need no one, not even God or I suppose I need God for the big and unusual things, but I can handle the ordinary things myself. So, I will pray in times of war, sickness etc. But at other times I will be alright under by own steam. Or pride will say: - "My talents are mine. I will show them off and take the credit. My ideas and preferences are not to be questioned." The tragedy of so many good people is the injection of pride that runs through their lives. Some can be proud of the holiest things such as prayer and kindness. Some can even be proud of humility.

Saint Francis always mentioned humility in the same breath with poverty. Some of his most striking statements concern humility. Here are some of them: "A person is what they are in the sight of God and nothing more." "The better a person really is the worse they feel themselves to be." The more we appreciate God's gifts and generosity the more humble we will become. The only thing Francis would take pride in was the cross of Christ. To Francis living the gospel life meant charity, not judging others. He was not worried about measuring his gifts and talents against those of others. We are not better or worse than anyone else. We are to develop the gifts with which God has blessed us, using them with humility and at no time do we need to prove that we are better than anyone else. Remembering that the spirit of God lives in each person we meet. The proud, the downtrodden, the beautiful, the homely, the wise, the foolish, the good and the not so good, and be mindful that there may be times when we will be like each of them.

As Francis once said - "There but for the grace of God go I."

Reference: L. Foley/J.Weigel/P. Normile

j.p.mckenna@xtra.co.nz