

Francis of Assisi 7 October 2018

Reflection

“Francis, go and rebuild my church, which you see is in ruins” . . . so the crucifix in the half-ruined Church of San Damiano seemed to speak to the searching young man of Assisi, as he knelt before it in prayer. We probably know the story. How, born into wealth, in 1182, of a prosperous merchant father, raised with too much freedom, having lived the high life socially, Francis also experienced service in a petty war and a spell as a prisoner of war before turning toward the spiritual depths awaiting his discovery.

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With typical compulsiveness Francis sold some goods belonging to his father to pay for repairs, and went to live with the priest of San Damiano. A long and bitter altercation with his father culminated in the famous scene before the Bishop of Assisi. Francis renounced his earthly father and all his wealth, even to the clothes he was then wearing. Dressed in a grey-brown peasant’s smock that the bishop gave him and with a piece of rope for a belt, Francis then began a life of poverty, preaching the love and peace of Christ.

His yoking to Christ became his freedom – wealth for poverty, vanity turned to humility.

Living by himself at first, Francis was later joined by a small group of disciples, eventually becoming the Friars Minor. They lived at Portiuncula, three kilometres from Assisi, near a leper colony. It was in his encounters with the lepers of the colony, that Francis lived out the compassion of Christ. It was in them, that he saw Christ so clearly. Before he turned 30, Francis had the Pope’s blessing and thousands of followers, who also were looking to see and serve Jesus amongst the lowly – not just people, but in the whole of creation.

Brother Francis, refusing to live comfortably within the normative attitudes, behaviours and societal structures of *his* day, offered genuine, sincere healing hospitality to

those around him, who were outcast and impoverished. We know that in the Middle Ages, the disease of leprosy, the oldest and most dreaded of all diseases, was a terrible scourge. Lepers would be seen with the most hideous of skin ailments: sores all over their bodies; bones protruding; eyes forever draining: wounded people, broken down, festering, stinking.

The response to leprosy, by both Church and state, exactly mirrored the legal codes of the Old Testament. Lepers were outcasts. No matter who the person had been – whether they were prominent, or wealthy, or educated, of whatever culture or race or religion or gender – if they contracted leprosy, they would be thrown out, exiled, and quarantined, so dreaded was the disease. [In our own backyard Otamahua (better known as Quail Island), in Lyttelton Harbour, was a leper colony from 1907 to 1925.]

However, a leper in the Middle Ages, died a slow, repulsive, lonely death. But it was in these people, that Francis saw the image of Christ.

In whom do you see the image of Christ today? Who and where are the suffering, the exiled and quarantined? Whom do you dread to encounter?

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

For Francis, the transformation to living simply, loving the outcast, serving the suffering was the ‘burden’ he willingly carried. Yoked with Christ – the ‘easy’, well-fitting yoke opened Francis’ eyes and heart not only to the least, last and lost of God’s family but to the family of *all* Creation - Brother Sun, and Sister Moon- the stars and heavens... Brothers Wind and Air, clouds and storms; Sister Water and Brother Fire; Mother Earth.

Sometimes, it is when we are most burdened, fragile, vulnerable, that we see the divine most clearly, encounter the divine most deeply. Times of grief and depression in my own life story seemed to tenderise me, soften and open me to beauty in small things – sparrows and daisies, spider webs and morning dew, children’s laughter, a gentle touch, elders’ worn and wrinkled hands. Like Francis, we discover that we are all interconnected – with each other, all creation and the Divine. The whole world is an icon. Can we make peace with ourselves and with each other, taking Christ’s yoke upon us, acknowledging our *unique* place in God’s creation story, our part in the greater whole?

I invite you this week, to gaze intently. Gaze at something long enough that you can see through it to its source. And may the gentle Christ companion you.

Let us pray:

Compassionate God,
 You embrace us in our simplicity
 and meet us in our brokenness.
 As we remember and give thanks
 for your servant Francis this day,
 enlarge our hearts to welcome
 the unloved and the unlovely,
 the outcast and the stranger in our midst.

Enliven our senses to your Creation
 That, yoked with Christ,
 we may encounter you afresh
 And live each day in contentment,
 Wonder and delight. Amen.

Helen Roud