

# ‘St Francis, a saint for today’

Sermon message at St James on St Francis’ Day 2018 by the Rev Derek Lightbourne

Keynote bible reading: Matthew 11.25 – 30, Psalm 148

Who would have thought a modern-day Pope would take the name of Francis? The world out there, if they had heard of St Francis would have been of patron saint of animals. Surely that wasn’t why he took the name. Less well known is St Francis’ life, one of simplicity and devotion. One of great courage too, as we shall hear. Even less well known is the vision given Francis – that God was calling him. Francis had prayed, ‘O Lord may I do what is truly your will. To which he believed God responded ‘Go and repair my church which you see is falling into ruins.’ The Catholic church today isn’t that but I’m sure behind the present Pope’s naming is a commitment to bring the church into contemporary context – inwardly addressing issues and outwardly drawing the world attention to ethical and moral issues in poverty and climate change. This Pope will certainly leave a legacy, as did Francis in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Here’s some *background to Francis*, his life and legacy. He is associated with Assisi, a village north of Rome. I have memories of visiting there – quite special. Walking up the hill from the train I was struck by the number of churches – all Catholic, including one “church within a church’. Lots of souvenir shops selling any manner of religious symbols probably made in the Philippines. Then one comes to the largest church – the Basilica of St Francis. Some years ago, Assisi experienced an earthquake seriously damaging the church including the large frescoes round the inside. These have been restored and they depict incidents in the life of St Francis. Then downstairs is a simple crypt where Francis’ remains lay along with some of his faithful companions. Even with all the tourists there was a sense of sacredness. Then a number of ‘religious’ dressed in the robes that Francis and St Clare wore.

It may be also that there’s been times like Francis that we have cried out to Jesus to come and be with us, those for whom we care. In a number of churches there

His legacy also extends to Christmas and it was Francis who gave us the Christmas crib as a way of adoring the birth of the Christ –child. Being in Italy late November I well remember an array of decorated lit Crib scenes in shop windows.

In a number of the churches one sees the distinctive cross through which the Lord spoke to Francis. [+]. Francis interpreted his vision as a call to leave his affluent life and enter into poverty. As we think of Saint Francis today it is not only about his love and care for animals.

1) Francis is recognised as the founder of the *Order of Franciscans*, very much active today in both Catholic and Anglican traditions. This had small beginnings as at first Francis was by himself, living alone with establishing his rule of life, poverty chastity and obedience. He was joined by a small group of followers, the Order of Friars Minor. They established the rule of life and it grew beyond expectation from its poverty-laden simple beginnings. Such was the popularity it grew and spread including to England by 1224 and established the mark of ‘Franciscan spirituality’, based on peace, truth and piety. Other aspects include the centrality of the Eucharist, penitence, study and reading, self-denial, simplicity

and obedience. There're numbers in NZ as members of the 'Third Order' keeping a simple vow.

2) A second aspect of St Francis for today was in the relationship of Christians to Muslims. Francis' life was lived with a background of the Crusades. Rather than be separate Francis sought to initiate dialogue between the two faiths. There's an account of how he went to Damietta in Egypt in 1219, the base of the Christian forces. Francis went ahead and into the camp of the Sultan asking to meet with him. This was certainly indicative that he was willing to risk martyrdom, as a witness to Christianity. He was received by the Sultan and Francis challenged him to remove his forces from the holy city Jerusalem. The Sultan was willing to discuss the issue, but Francis went further and challenged him to an 'ordeal' – his willingness to be martyred for the cause. The Sultan declined the challenge, quoting from the Koran 'that has no value.' Francis then returned to the encampment feeling very let down. From this encounter Assisi has from time to time been the venue for dialogue between Christian and Muslim faith leaders. Rather than the antipathy between the faiths, his was an example for church leaders of these days.

3) A third aspect is what Francis focussed in *prayer*. His own intensity led to the 'stigmata' experience, a vision of the crucified Lord Jesus and the marks of his cross appeared on his body. He experienced frequent ecstatic visions and received from God assurance of a place reserved in heaven for him. What has developed from this for believers is termed 'Sensate prayer'. That is prayer sensing God's presence in sight, sound, touch, hearing, and taste. In that way it differs from other prayer forms evoking the mind and thought. He found himself in relationship with God and with creation. Thus, for example in his prayer to 'Brother Sun and Sister Moon...' This aim of the prayer is to experience God in the present, with being concerned for simplicity, immediacy and awareness. Other prayer styles move back into the past (what God has done) and into forward into the future – what might be. The (Catholic) practice of the rosary focuses on the sensate prayer, with the touch helping to keep the mind from wandering out of the present awareness of God. Other ways include the experience of fragrance and beauty of creation or a lit candle as a worship focus, symbolising Christ-light present. Someone has written that it purifies and transforms the inner senses so there is a meeting with God of that which is deep within us. That focus on creation in sensate prayer wasn't new in St Francis – the Psalms of Scripture contain numbers of examples: 'I will lift up my eyes to the hills.....' and 'You lead me beside still waters, you restore my soul.' This form of prayer can be used any time, day or night, wherever we are, and it may be unconsciously being prayed, realising God's presence. Indeed, it's likely you include this way of praying in your own prayers, perhaps not realising that in this we follow St Francis' example.

Finally, then, there's so much to commend Francis' life and prayer. His love of creation lives in being patron saint of animal lovers preaching to the birds of the air. He established an Order based on simple living and with his followers, men and women he did influence the church of his day. Such was the impact of his profound devotion and commitment to the Lord Jesus, he deserves our focus for this Sunday.