

Sermon – Feast of St Francis

October 4, 2015

“Lord grant that I may not so much seek to be loved, but to love.” Amen

You'd have to have been living on Mars to not have seen or heard something of the recent visit to the US by the Bishop of Rome. Pope Francis seems to be a man of modest means, carrying with him from Buenos Aires to Rome his penchant for humble living and a connection with the disenfranchised of our society. It was reported that on receiving the necessary votes in the election conclave his friend Cardinal Hummes hugged him and said to him “Don't forget the poor.” The new Pope told the waiting journalists that he took these words to heart and chose to be called after St Francis of Assisi, “the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation.”

Today we have set aside the propers for this 19th Sunday after Pentecost to honor St Francis of Assisi, the man that has inspired this new pope. He may also be a man that has inspired you. Very little is actually known about St Francis, as there has been a blending of fact and myth over the many years since his death in the 13th century.

What we do know is that Francis started life as the son of a wealthy merchant family and benefited from his family's status, living an early life of relative privilege. Many things have been written about Francis but there was one account in a book by GK Chesterton that caught my attention.

He tells the story that one day Francis was selling “velvet and fine embroideries” in the marketplace to a “powerful merchant” when a beggar came asking for alms, evidently in a rather abrupt way. Apparently Francis was a polite man and tried to deal with both the merchant and the beggar at the same time. But not satisfying the beggar with alms the man left. When the merchant had gone, Francis chased

after the beggar like “an arrow from a bow” and after some time found him in the crooked streets of the little town. He loaded him with money and vowed there before God that in all his life he would **not refuse to help a poor person.**

It seems a fairly straightforward encounter of one person helping another. But for me the interesting thing was that it appears to have started the transformation of Francis from the merchant, into Francis **the compassionate one**, and the person we celebrate today, the one that recognized the dignity of all God’s creation. Francis was transformed by his encounter with this poor man because **he saw his humanness**. He saw the sacredness of the individual creation. Nothing was background for Francis it was all **dramatic and distinct**.

We too can be transformed to see the sacredness of all of creation, seeing nature, the creatures, and people as individual parts of creation, not just **part of the scenery of life**.

Now whether we like the pope or not, I don’t think we can help but to see God’s light shining from him as he demonstrates to the world the act of reaching out to see, to connect with and to honor the poor, the sick, the hungry, the incarcerated and the disenfranchised people of our communities. **He sees the individual** not just the scenery.

Pope Francis’ sermon to the gathered at the mass in Madison Square Garden focused on the light of Christ that shines for those **that walk in the darkness of our world**, especially in the big cities. He called on the faithful to contemplate God’s light and said that, “**one special quality** of God’s people is their ability **to see, to contemplate**, even in moments of darkness.”

Pope Francis went on to say “Big cities also conceal the faces of all those people who don’t appear to belong, or are second-class citizens. In big cities, beneath the roar of traffic, beneath ‘the rapid pace of change,’ so

many faces pass unnoticed because they have no “right” to be there, no right to be part of the city. They are the foreigners, the children who go without schooling, those deprived of medical insurance, the homeless, the forgotten elderly. These people stand at the edges of our great avenues, in our streets in **deafening anonymity**. They become part of an urban landscape which is more and more taken for granted, in our eyes, and especially in our hearts.” – *in deafening anonymity, they become part of the scenery of life!*

It never ceases to amaze me how our humanness essentially remains unchanged down through the ages. The reading this morning from Isaiah shows us how we so often give lip service to meeting the needs of others. I’m certainly guilty of doing just this. Isaiah points out the folly of the holy people of his day that used fasting, a holy practice, to serve their own interest rather than serving God and God’s people.

In v3, which precedes today’s text, Isaiah says, “why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves but you do not notice? Look you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.”

Isaiah reminds the people that the practice of fasting should be acceptable to the Lord. It should “loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke.” He goes on “**Is it not** to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

The result of fasting appropriately is “[that] your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.” In essence there will be a positive effect. So we contemplate the light and the healing that our actions can bring to this world, and to this community. When we take these actions **no longer will some of the people standing at the edges be anonymous.**

My best buddy from seminary is now a priest on the bishop's staff in Los Angeles. We catch up every month or so and check in. I got to know him well during seminary, so well that when I felt he was withdrawing I knew something was playing heavily on his mind. A few months ago I had that same feeling and so I called him. It took him a few days to get back to me but when we did speak he told me **what had gotten him down.**

The Diocesan center in Los Angeles is located in Echo Park, just a few miles from the downtown area. The building faces the park and lake, and of course the endlessly dry and warm weather attracts many people to the area. One day he found a man lying on the steps. The man was homeless and recounted also that he was a veteran. My friend offered to help the man and spent a day taking him around LA to various agencies trying to get him support. Eventually he said he was referred to a shelter and took the man there and waited whilst the staff checked him in. He left feeling like he had done something positive for this man.

The next day though, he found the man back on the steps of the Diocesan Center. The man told him that he couldn't stay at the shelter because they wouldn't let him drink there. Addiction also played a part in this man's life. My friend felt dejected because he couldn't solve this man's problem.

As we talked I suggested that he might **have done a wonderful thing for this man** because he had seen him and cared for him. He'd found out his name and got to know some of his story. Now when my friend walked his dog around the lake he could say hello to the man and check in to see how he was doing. A relationship had formed between the two. **No longer was this man anonymous.**

Francis, you, me, all of us can give those around us identity, awareness and connection just as St Francis demonstrated to us through his transformed life. This requires nothing other than a heart that is open to

God's mercy and passion, to see the face in the crowd, the person at the gate and the stranger standing on the edge.

Jesus tells us that we will always have the poor with us, and we can extend this to those impacted by mental health illness, the disease of addiction, trauma from sexual or physical abuse, victims of bullying or prejudice, and veterans of war. Someone will always be worse off than we are but one day we might be that worse off person.

Jesus said that if we feel burdened or weak we can come to him, and we do this through prayer and finding support in our community. Through God's Spirit we can find rest in this work of transformation we are called to do. Jesus' gentle and humble presence to the other can teach us. The yoke is easy and the burden is light.

St Francis saw the beauty of creation and in it God's radiance. **God's light must shine through us in the darkness.** We are called to always be ready to reach out, to see and to connect. When we make connection and give identity to the suffering, God's light shines just that little bit brighter in the world in which we live.

St Francis is celebrated and remembered today because he set this wonderful example of seeing God's love and light in all of God's creation. His lived example shows us how to honor that gift and **connect with all of God's creation so that nothing stands in deafening anonymity.**