

# *the eye of the needle*

a sermon preached on the

## *Feast of St Francis*

11 October 2015

at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Amos 5:6-7,10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

The lifetime of Francis (1181/2 to 1226) coincides with a turbulent period in the history of the church. The turn of the first millennium was a critical hinge in the development of Western consciousness. Emerging by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century from about five centuries of darkness and chaos, in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries the Holy Roman Empire was beginning to flex its muscles. Though we think of 'the Reformation' as a movement which started with Martin Luther famously nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenberg church door in 1517, in fact the religious dissent roots of Reformation can be identified in those first two centuries of the second millennium.

Reaction was growing to the clericalism and power of the church, breaking out in a great many grass-roots movements. Among the better-known popular resistance and reform movements were those with names such as the Cathars, the Waldensians, and the Albigensians – and the 'Brethren (and Sisters!) of the Free Spirit'. Condemnation by kings and papal edict prompted imprisonments, persecution, and the burning of 'heretics' at the stake – and the increasing power of 'Inquisition'.

The essence of the Free Spirit movement was the discovery that individuals could meet God directly, through an inner light – thus rendering the church and all its institutional power and regulations and control of the sacraments as irrelevant! All this amounted to a rejection of the church's claim to regulate converse with God – a rejection of institutional spiritual power. Thus was the religious milieu into which Giovanni di Pietro di Bernadone emerged.

Francesco, as his cloth-merchant father called him, rejected the substantial family wealth. He embraced lepers as an identification with Christ who is outcast and poor. His exasperated father dragged the wayward son before the Bishop for discipline reinforcement. But Francis stripped off all his clothing, standing stark naked before the Bishop and his court, declaring his allegiance to the self-emptying way of Christ – for "all are naked and laid bare before the eyes of the one to whom we must give an account".<sup>1</sup> While such anarchic behaviour might have caused Francis to be burned as a heretic along with the Cathars – it is reckoned that what saved him was his complete devotion to the church and the Pope. That is to say, he rejected the church's *material* power, but not its *spiritual* power.

Also, in contrast to the Cathars who regarded the world as evil, Francis "passionately affirmed that all created things – Brother Sun, Sister Moon – were good, sharing in the goodness of God's human incarnation in Christ".<sup>2</sup> This difference was crucial. Unlike the Cathars' abhorrence of flesh – and as a protest against the rising rationalism of 'Scholastic' theology – Francis 'invented' the Christmas Crib and the Stations of the Cross, as explicit affirmations of the essential goodness of the flesh. At the end of his life Francis received the *stigmata* of Christ: "What greater symbol could there be than Francis' *stigmata* that the divine suffering condescended into flesh?"<sup>3</sup>

Of course, though a 'saint', Francis was hardly perfect. His support for the church's spiritual power kept him from the heretic-burning pyres – but, sadly, he blessed the church's

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 4:13

<sup>2</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, **A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years**, London: Penguin Books, 2010, p403.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

appalling support for that deadly folly whose toxic effects we are still dealing with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely, the crusades.

The name Francis chose for his order is telling: ‘Brothers Minor’. They were to be among the poor, on the road, living simply. But even in his lifetime Francis became deeply concerned that his followers had not understood his charism – organising themselves into yet another institution; abandoning the poverty he regarded as central, in favour of large-scale building programs; becoming brothers *major*! And major they indeed were: during the next few centuries wielding significant power on Western politics and colonial conquest. One suspects Francis would weep. One also suspects the massive monumental edifice erected over his tomb in Assisi – as well as the multi-million dollar tourist spectacle which it has become – might cause Francis to turn in his grave.

The Spirit is all too readily trapped by buildings, institutional rules, money, and the drive for power - and we become preoccupied with our ‘many possessions’<sup>4</sup> – a sobering fact which Christianity ignores at its peril. We so easily forget the way of the upside down kingdom: “the first will be last”.<sup>5</sup>

For Christians, Jesus is of course the first ‘Brother of the Free Spirit’ – as his life, his teachings, and his shown-down with the religious rule-keepers so clearly demonstrate. Only a person who is truly free in the Spirit brushes off the flattery and the sees through the self-justifying dishonesty of the smooth-talking rich and powerful elite,<sup>6</sup> and with such incisive, razor sharp two-edged-sword<sup>7</sup> insight: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God”.<sup>8</sup>

Did we really hear that?

So, in these testing times for the church – anxious as we are about our finances, our parish’s future, Christianity’s ‘waning influence’, rising militant Islam, and so on, and so easily distracted as we are about peripheral details – it’s vital that we attend to the ‘one thing lacking’,<sup>9</sup> becoming constantly re-centred in the liberating charism of Christ, a charism we see embodied in his disciple Francis.

Baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ is a call to true freedom: the opposite of the illusory pseudo-freedom promised by ‘the market’ and consumer ideology. Freedom from possessions, control, money, and power; as sisters and brothers of the truly free Spirit. Freedom in the One who knows this journey, who is “tested as we are”.<sup>10</sup> By our baptism – and sustained week after week in the Eucharist – it is we ourselves who are to become “swift-rushing winds that are so strong”, the inner “fire so masterful and bright”,<sup>11</sup> the Spirit who blows us where she will.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of today’s gospel the disciples give voice to your and my feeling that this vocation is impossible: “Then who can be saved!”<sup>13</sup> Francis grasped the Master’s teaching: contrary to all our fear and anxiety and disbelief, “with God all things are possible”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:22

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10:31

<sup>6</sup> Mark 10:17-18

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 4:12

<sup>8</sup> Mark 10:25

<sup>9</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 4:15

<sup>11</sup> From the hymn attributed to Francis, ‘All creatures of our God and king’, in **Together in Song**, 100.

<sup>12</sup> John 3:8

<sup>13</sup> Mark 10:26

<sup>14</sup> Mark 10:27