

# *franciscan spirituality*

a sermon preached on the feast of

*st francis of assisi*

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Sirach 3:17-23; Galatians 6:14-18, Matthew 11:25-30

The spirituality of St Francis of Assisi has been called Christocentric, evangelical, existential, tender, devotional, and practical.<sup>1</sup> Francis had a profound sense of God as transcendent mystery and holy love. His love of the risen Lord present in the littleness and silence of the eucharist made Eucharistic devotion a pillar of Franciscan spirituality.

Everything centred on Christ; the poor, humble, obedient, suffering Servant. Francis sought to follow the gospel literally; but his understanding of 'literal observance' did not mean the small-minded puritanical legalism of those who claim to be 'literal believers'. Rather, it meant a total commitment to the *spiritual values* the gospel proclaims. His radical poverty was derived from the revelation in Christ of the self-emptying of God. The self-emptying of God is absolutely central; which is why the doctrine of Incarnation is so fundamental to Franciscan spirituality.

Crucially, Incarnation is *not* because of sin. This spiritual insight alone should be enough to liberate us from the churches' Christ-denying obsession with sinfulness, and its neurotic and toxic theories of 'expiation'. No, says Francis, God's love alone is the reason for Incarnation, because God is formally Love. Redemption is simply the way in which God's love overcomes the power of evil.

Francis's spirituality was grounded in the gospels; and it was from the gospel that he came to his seminal insight: that the Incarnation is "decreed because God wills to have co-lovers in God's love". We are to be co-lovers with Love!

From this spirituality of love flows the Franciscan insight that nothing is outside God's love. This means that all God's creatures – indeed the whole of the creation – are in Christ, and thus an embodiment of the Divine Love. Which is what enabled Francis to look on "all creatures as brothers and sisters united in the vast friary of the universe."

In times of great suffering and destruction, such as our era is enduring – and which, we recall, was the backdrop of Francis's world also – only a spirituality of Incarnation can look upon 'all creatures as sisters and brothers in the vast friary of the universe'.

What is the primary organ for apprehending this vision of Love? As you would expect from a person who set Incarnation, enfleshment, at the centre of his spiritual vision, the way one receives and grasps and embodies the love of God in the self-emptying Christ is of course the heart. In this Francis' spirituality aligns with the Orthodox insight that it's all about 'putting the mind in the heart'. That is, the mind must always be in the service of the heart – that organ, and font, and centre of the human being.

This love of the incarnate Lord prompted in Francis devotions such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Christmas Crib, and the Stations of the Cross. But Francis' Christmas Crib was not sentimentality or pantomime. The vision he received before the San Damiano Crucified Christ (referred to in Contact today) was central in his entire vocation. In this he echoed St Paul: "I carry the marks of Jesus branded in my body".<sup>2</sup> The stigmata he received at the end of his life were like the tangible fulfilment of what had been the whole of his vocation.

The Mother of Christ was also central to Francis' spirituality. He saw that "we are mothers to our Lord Jesus Christ when we enthrone him in our hearts and souls... and give birth to him by doing good". This synthesis – of enthroning Christ in the heart and giving birth to him by doing good – is central to the Franciscan Order having been described as *contemplative-*

<sup>1</sup> See Eric Doyle, 'Franciscan Spirituality, Franciscans', in Gordon S Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London: SCM Press, 1983, pp159-161.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 6:17

*active*. During our Spring Series I have been referring to the Franciscan Richard Rohr. He is fond of saying that in the name he chose for the community he founded – the ‘Centre for Action and Contemplation’ – the word ‘and’ is the crucial one.

In the terms of today’s gospel, truth is hidden from the ‘wise and intelligent’; not because there’s anything wrong with being either wise or intelligent, but because God’s self-emptying, God’s condescension – as Incarnation has been called – is the key to true wisdom and insight and participation in the Divine Love as sons and daughters.

To repeat: the mind must be put into the heart. The mind must *serve the heart*. It’s Francis’s spirituality of placing the self-emptying of Incarnation at its centre that makes Francis an ‘infant’ in gospel terms.<sup>3</sup> The ‘wise and intelligent’ reject the gospel of self-emptying. We have so many ‘wise and intelligent’ ways of rejecting the good news of self-emptying, don’t we? Again, Francis echoes St Paul: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”.<sup>4</sup>

We see in today’s gospel that Christ’s desire was to relieve his brothers and sisters of the heavy burden.<sup>5</sup> What is the ‘heavy burden’? It’s the religion of law, purity, righteousness, wealth, power, of calculation, measurement, comparison, competition, performance, and so on; Christ’s desire is that we live in the grace of his easy yoke of self-emptying love. Yes, this is the unexpected and life-giving evangellion: self-emptying love is the easy yoke.

And so we see this self-emptying love in the Christmas Crib, in the Sacred Heart, in the God-bearing of Mary, and in the icon of the crucified-and-risen pierced Christ, whose life-blood is the life of the world – which we are invited to drink, so as to become ‘infants’ like Christ, and his brother Francis.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 11:25

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 6:14

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:28