

saint francis for today

a sermon preached on the
feast of saint francis

12 October 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by mother emily fraser

The lection: Luke 10:21 - 24

Today we have gathered to celebrate the Feast of St Francis, which is a popular moment to give thanks for our animals. Francis was known for his theology which celebrated God as creator of all, and Francis recognised the divine in all things, from the smallest bee to the largest of elephants. Stories are told of his addressing animals as 'brother' and 'sister', and his pausing to preach to the birds, who likewise paused to hear him speak of God and Christ.

So today, we give thanks for the wonder of creation, and we bring our pets to Church for blessings as St Francis is the patron saint of animals. This is fitting, as our pets are important to us and they are very beneficial as companions to us. They even have a proven role in promoting good mental health and wellbeing (today marks the end of National Mental Health Week) - any pet owner can tell you what extraordinary affection we develop with our pets and they with us. However, Francis' legacy goes much further than a celebration of all things bright and beautiful.

Francis was a man who worked to spread the word of the Gospel, who passionately believed in Christ and was willing to answer a call to a life of poverty and obedience in following a Christ-like life and the establishment of the Franciscan orders. He found his vocation, and he did not pause for a moment in beginning to live it out and live it to the full.

In an act which shocked his wealthy family who had provided him with a privileged upbringing and existence, Francis shunned the great wealth of his family and left their home for a life spent travelling and preaching to the communities he visited. He literally and symbolically stripped himself of his clothes before his family and other townspeople to demonstrate his changed thinking and his new vocation. Stripped naked, he became like the infant in Luke's Gospel to whom the knowledge and love of God has been revealed.

Francis, in his vow of poverty and the work he undertook, had an affinity with the poor, dedicating himself to working for them and providing for their needs as best he could. He lived out the call of the Gospel to attend to those who the world has forgotten or ignored, and who have been ostracised from the community.

So Francis' legacy to us is twofold – firstly, he offers us an awareness of creation and our responsibility to maintain and preserve its wonders; secondly, Francis gives us a legacy of compassion and kindness that we can hold as inspiration. Francis is a man who acted out the core of the Gospel, which is to love, ministering to all who were in need just as Christ spent his time not solely with the high and mighty, but with the poor and the marginalised.

In Francis we also have an example of a Christian who actively sought for and participated in interfaith dialogues, especially with the Muslim community, and according to one biographer, Michael Robson, Francis was especially known for his 'courteous and respectful attitude towards those who did not share his Christian faith'.

Francis, at the height of the crusades, went into the East and sought to speak with the Muslim powers, even the sultan, placing his life in their hands and himself at risk of persecution and death if he was rejected. He came as one who wished to learn, wished to gently enter into conversation with the Muslim people rather than control them and convert them by threat or force.

In the midst of violence and relentless butchery, Francis sought dialogue, with gentleness and intelligence. This is an example we can well learn from in the light of recent controversies about Islam and the growing Islamophobia we see not just in our Australian society but around the world.

In addition to all this, Francis' wisdom is also a legacy to inspire us. He knew that words are wonderful, as they express and teach us those things which shape and guide our lives, but they must be lived out, and it's what we do that most overtly demonstrates who we are. He said that "when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that have received – only what you have given", and these words are an important call to look to how we live and move in this world, and to be aware of the grace of giving to others.

And finally, among his patronages, Saint Francis is the patron saint of stowaways, which you can reasonably extend to a patronage of asylum seekers – those who seek the safety of foreign shores. As a man of compassion who welcomed and helped the poor, it's a fitting patronage and one where a Franciscan response would show the mercy and generosity of Christ, on whom Francis modelled his ministry.

In the words of today's Gospel, Francis is one of those who saw, and heard, and understood. Francis also knew, in his belief that even animals have the capacity to know God and are beloved of God, that our relationship with God is not based on our intellectual capacity, our ability to speak complex notions of theology and rhetoric, but based on the pure fact that we are all creations of the divine, and still retain that divine genesis.

God speaks to all, just as God spoke to Francis, just as God speaks to us through the love and faithfulness of our animals whom we have brought to this Church in thanks to God.

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