

turn your eyes upon Jesus

a sermon preached on the

feast of st francis

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at

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Lections: Sir 3:17-23; Ps 148; Gal 6:14-18; Mt 11:25-30

I have been wondering something – what would Francis of Assisi think about the fact that we have set aside a Feast Day for him? What do you think? Although he was someone who celebrated beauty in the world and had a joyful heart, I suspect that he would say humbly, and maybe in some embarrassment, “Don’t focus on me – I am not important – Look to Christ”.

In our gospel reading today, in a wonderful intimate moment, Jesus says to his Father: “I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants (or the little ones); yes Father, for such was your gracious will”.

Up to this point in Matthew’s gospel, there has been rejection of Jesus by the powerful and clever – opposition, hostility and misunderstanding. But this has been matched by acceptance by others, the so-called *little ones*, who in simple trust not only understand but also accept the good news message of Jesus. And Jesus here, in a moment of shared love with God the Father, says: Thank you Father, I can see this was your will to do it this way – to reveal yourself to those who humbly accept who I am!

You might be thinking: and what does this have to do with St Francis? This is a reasonable question because Francis was one of those who would not normally be thought capable of accepting and understanding the message and good news of Christ. He was an energetic, fun-loving charming young man it seems, with a sense of entitlement, although even from an early stage he appears to have had within him a seed of compassion for others. He came from a wealthy family but, after a few twists and turns in his early life, he stripped himself of everything to imitate Christ in utter humility, simplicity and poverty, *indeed* one of those little ones Jesus speaks about. Quite a turnaround! After a somewhat rocky spiritual journey in his early twenties, Francis became passionate about following Christ with single-hearted devotion. So how did this occur? Many of you know parts of the story at least.

Although when we look at his life we encounter an interweaving of historical facts and legends, one thing shines clearly through – Love! “*A strange young man too full of love*” said Ernest Raymond in his 1938 book, *In the Steps of St Francis*. Is that possible? Can one be too full of love – of the love of Christ? Ultimately, Francis dared to let the surging love in him determine his every movement and thought. As Wakefield said: “He wasn’t radically poor because he was an ascetic, but because he loved Jesus”.¹ And his biographer Celano commented: “he was always thinking about Jesus; Jesus was in his mouth, in his ears, in his eyes, in his hands; Jesus was in his whole being”.

What were some of the things that happened to foster the intensity of the love of Christ within Francis?

In 1205 he had a vision which took away his interest in worldly things, and he then began wholeheartedly pursuing God – in prayer, in embracing poverty, and in caring for others. The next major step of his spiritual journey occurred in the forsaken ruined church of San Damiano outside the city walls of Assisi. Perhaps you have been there. Walked that short walk outside the Assisi city walls to

¹ Gordon Wakefield (Ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 1988), 157.

the church where a copy of a significant icon crucifix in Francis's spiritual journey now hangs. Or perhaps you have seen the original icon now located in the Basilica of St Clare within Assisi.

As Francis contemplated the icon crucifix in San Damiano, and gazed upon Christ, he heard Jesus say to him "Francis, Francis, go and repair my house which you can see is falling into ruins". At first, he thought this meant the ruined church he was in, but he later realized Christ was also referring to the wider church which was full of chaos and corruption. And at another deeper level, rebuilding included the transformation of his own heart – a rebuilding of Francis himself. And this transformation occurred continuously through his life as he gazed on Christ in constant prayer. Now the very important thing about the crucifix on which he gazed is the way the image of Christ on the cross is portrayed. On that cross Christ is not depicted as dead but alive! Blood is still flowing from his wounded hands and side and feet. And he is upright, not sagging from the weight of his body on his hands and feet. This is an image of the risen Christ who has conquered death. We have such an icon in our own chapel, painted by Judy Moore, a compelling image of an alive Christ on the cross, risen from the tomb. This powerful image reminds us that Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection are not *two* events but *one* – we cannot separate them, for together they reconcile us to God. And importantly also, we see in both icons, that Jesus' eyes are not closed, but open, looking at us in love. That gaze for Francis opened his heart fully. The mutual gaze of intimate love then compelled him to focus his life totally on the living Christ.

And so, this again echoes our scripture readings for today: In Matthew we have read of the moment of loving intimacy between God the Father and Jesus – an exceptional revealing in the synoptic gospels of the loving relationship between Father and Son. And in Galatians, Paul says: "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". So both Francis and Paul have been drawn into the very heart of love within the intimate relationship between Father and Son – the love that has entered into our very humanness to draw us back to God. *Of course* Francis and Paul are compelled to follow Christ – in a sense they have no choice, once they have experienced the direct loving gaze of Christ and heard his call. Furthermore, they became moment by moment what they gazed upon. This transformation into a new self was imaged by the Christ they gazed upon, *and* by the pure loving gaze of Christ toward them.

In all humility, Francis then lived as a disciple of Christ, one of the little ones. He is sometimes called an *alter Christus*, or another Christ, in his complete dedication to the poor and his radical discipleship. In our liturgy today we have been reminded that part of that discipleship included his respect and love for all of creation. After experiencing that loving gaze of Christ, he was able to get in touch with a sense of the holiness of God in the beauty of creation, which, like a mirror, displays what God is like. Everywhere in the world around him he could see signs of God's presence; in the sun, moon and stars, in water and fire, in creatures large and small – like we have here today.

Later, in 1224, Francis received a vision that left him with the stigmata of Christ – marks resembling the wounds Christ suffered when he was crucified. So Francis, having already been pierced by the love of Christ in his heart, now received the holy wounds of that love, the stigmata, in his body. His biographer tells us they remained visible for the rest of his life. Like Paul who says "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body", this reminds us that to be a disciple of Jesus is costly.

So Jesus says to us: *Come unto Me*. Can we allow ourselves the time and the space to gaze upon Christ? And will we have the courage to allow him to gaze on us? When he gazes at us, what does he see? Listen to him; he is our true Love. Let us come to Christ in humility, for that is where true wisdom lies, as Francis himself discovered. Ask Christ: Love, what can I do for you?

As I reflected on Francis this week, I heard again the hymn I often used to sing in my youth: Perhaps you know it also:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
in the light of his glory and grace.*²

² Helen H. Lemmel, 1922.