

SERMON FOR ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY | 01.11.20

Revelation 7: 9 to the end; St Matthew 5: 1-12

Sometimes it pays to read last week's sermon before starting a new one because God is part of the process and he has a thread running even if I am not aware of it!

You may remember (in the context of the parish AGM that we held after the 10am Mass) that we were talking about the need for a parish to have a 'vision', an agreed direction of travel. We reflected on the way that vision had changed here at St James' over the last decade.

So as I got to thinking more and more about St Francis of Assisi, the focus for All Saints' Day this year, I was struck by something I hadn't known before: about the way his life had changed several times - by changes of perception, by changes of vision... This continuing theme was certainly not planned by me...

Francis – Francisco Bernadone – was only 44 when he died in 1226 and yet within two years, such was his influence, he had been made a saint by Pope Gregory IX. As we celebrate ALL the saints, we look at this remarkable life.

As many will know, Francis was born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. His father was an extremely wealthy cloth trader and there is no evidence that Francis wasn't quite content with his early life. He would have been home tutored and by all accounts this consisted of two things: the learning of languages and the acquisition of military skills appropriate to his status, horse-riding and swordsmanship. He was charming, funny, generous – and he loved clothes, parties and the girls. But the backdrop to this high life was always the fear that one would be called away to take part in the petty feuding that was ever-present between rival towns looking to increase their influence. So it was for Francis: at the age of 20 he was called up in a spat between Perugia and Assisi and was unfortunately taken prisoner and held hostage for over a year before being ransomed. He was very ill when he finally got home and it took him a long time to recover.

And somehow the world looked a very different place. The high life lost its appeal and he decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome.

And as he entered the city, what struck him was not the fabulously wealthy churches and the grand squares but the number of beggars that hung around the street corners, asking for money. On an impulse, he swapped his own clothes for those of one of the beggars and he spent the whole day seeing what it was like trying to get enough food to survive on. It was the turning point in his life and the backdrop to the famous story of how he returned to his father's house during a lavish family party. In front of all the guests he stripped naked, leaving his favourite yellow and red tunic on the floor. If the story is accurate; his father disowned him there and then.

(2) But what was Francis to do next? Now dressed in labourer's breeches he found a job repairing dilapidated churches. The first was that of St Damiano just outside the walls of Assisi. And it was there that he had his first vision: from the cross hanging in the sanctuary he heard the unmistakable words: *Come Francis, come and build my Church.*

Shortly afterwards, attending Mass at the small chapel of St Mary of the Angels at Portiuncula on the plain below Assisi, Francis had his second vision. This came after his hearing of the Gospel in which Jesus commands his followers to leave everything behind and follow him. Francis took that as his own personal call. Even the labourers breeches went; he now dressed in a coarse brown habit and went out to save souls.

But, of course, it was the same Francis underneath and his personality and warmth soon attracted others to come and work alongside him. Which was both wonderful – and a mixed blessing. As the numbers grew Francis realised that the group needed a Rule, some Sanding Orders, to live by.

This was not Francis' gift. He was actually pretty averse to any form of writing – or indeed scholarship of any kind. He barely read even the Bible. As he was to say later, the Church was completely burdened by texts, commentaries and rule books. Augustine, Jerome, the Cappadocian Fathers: all of them had been desperately trying to defend the Church from heresy and political attacks of all sorts.

Not for nothing has this period of the Church been called 'Scholasticism' – the time when the faith was endlessly subject to debate and dispute, a continuous round of wrangles about what words meant. The churches flourished, the universities flourished – and the line of beggars grew longer and longer.

So, having set up communities of friars – and a group for women, under the leadership of St Clare based in St Damiano – Francis wrote his simple rule for the new Franciscans. He hoped it would be a new model for the Church. But it was not to be: soon disputes broke out among the friars too.

Once more, Francis was off, fed up with the half-heartedness of those around him and the endless arguments. In 1215, just as King John of England was being forced to sign the Magna Carta, Francis made the perilous journey to Egypt. Despite the wars raging around him he managed to reach the court of the Sultan, al-Kamil, and is said to have spent hours with him in theological debate. And by 1223, three years before his death, Francis had largely handed over the running of the growing Franciscan Order to others. He was much better doing his own thing - on his own.

(3) It was in the last three years of his life that Francis was able to focus on his vision for the Church as he found sympathetic people who would actually listen to what he had to say. And his appeal came partly from the fact that his language was not that of the universities but was rooted in the vocabulary of ordinary people in the streets. *Forget the scholars who get drunk on their own glorious words: if you want to be drunk, get drunk on the glory of God!* he preached. *Whatsoever we are in the face of God, that is what we are, no more and no less.*

Many said his way of speaking was childish, full of childish logic and (sometimes) childish bad temper! But no one could doubt that the directness of his poetry, as we will see in his famous Song of St Francis, has a power that few of his contemporaries could match. It has a freshness, an immediacy and – yes, a child-like quality – which made Francis instantly popular. The themes are very much the same as those of the great scholastic, St Thomas of Aquinas, who wrote the great *Summa Theologica*, all 1.8 million words! Francis somehow condenses them into 32 lines!

Towards the end of his life Francis suffered terribly with trachoma and his eyesight almost completely failed him. The treatment in the 13th century involved cauterizing his ears and cheeks with red hot pokers.

Yet throughout all the pain, his feverishness and his exhausting fear of the rats that ran across him in the night, his confidence in God never failed: *I am to be grateful for my sufferings and give thanks to God for while I am still in the flesh he has given me the certainty that I shall enter his Kingdom. Therefore, for the consolation of the world, I shall make a new song of praise for all the creatures of the Lord whom we make use of, day by day, and without whom we cannot live, for we are not grateful enough to him for their help and in this we often offend him.*

St Francis' celebration of 'holy poverty', the virtue of doing without, of being grateful for all that one has, and of the calling to empathise with the poor (the beggars on the streets of Islington just as much as those in Rome) are just a part of his legacy. His love of the natural world and his intolerance for wrangling about words just for the sake of it, are also qualities which the Church is now taking up with more energy than ever under the current Pope who adopted both his name and many of his priorities.

Francis of Assisi, just one of all the saints. But his vision of simplicity and thankfulness in the face of adversity sets him as one of the greatest examples for us to celebrate today.