

I have preached several homilies on the feast day of St Francis, especially here, but also in previous locations ministry. Each time, I have realised that I can pick out only one or two core themes from his life and teaching, otherwise I would be overwhelmed by the immense amount of well-documented history and story that covers his life, ministry, and thought. So, even without having to rush off to San Blas, I hope that today's effort will be no exception for my eight-minute maximum time for preaching!

Our Gospel reading today sets the scene, if we just focus on one response of Jesus, my favourite, to those who would seek to follow him: 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' This is a classic metaphorical one-liner of Jesus, almost certainly spoken with tongue in cheek but also with profound meaning. It is about the priority of the gospel of the kingdom of God for all who would follow Jesus. And it suggests that there is a way of living that amounts to being dead, the spiritual death of those whose lives are empty and directionless.

By the 13th century, in the West, the Church itself was all but dead. It had certainly lost its way. The medium had become greater than the message. The radical values of Jesus and his gospel had been lost or domesticated in an institutional religious system that was now part of the political and social establishment. The clergy were wealthy and even the monks lived comfortably, while most of the faithful ordinary folk lived in poverty and need.

But by the grace of God, along came Giovanni di Bernadone of Assisi in Italy, from a wealthy family. His father, who liked all things French, which included his wife, had nicknamed him 'the little Frenchman,' Francesco, and the name stuck. After a carefree youth, military service, and a year as a prisoner of war, Francesco, or Francis, as we call him, rejected the privileges and expectations of his family, and went off to begin what would turn out to be a minor revolution in the mediaeval Church. It all started with him having a mystical experience of Jesus telling him to go and rebuild his church, which initially Francis understood literally as his beloved local chapel of San Damiano was virtually in ruins. He was also inspired by a sermon he heard about Jesus sending out his disciples with minimal resources. In 1209, aged 27, Francis founded a community to go and do likewise. Within a year he had eleven followers, or friars as they would be called. They lived a simple life based at a

common house but went about preaching in the countryside of Umbria. They lived among the people and had a special ministry to the poor and the sick. They called themselves the 'lesser brothers' choosing not to pursue ordination.

Francis wanted his community to be recognised as a special order and ministry within the Church. Surprisingly and quickly the Franciscans were given that approval by the pope of the day. The movement proved to be popular and began to spread rapidly throughout Italy and beyond. A young noblewoman called Clare was drawn to Francis and his way of life and in due course established a women's Order which eventually became known as the Poor Clares.

Francis exemplified the life which Jesus challenged people to live, that is to live *in* the gospel. Significantly, he turned round people's attitudes to lepers and leprosy, the big disease of the day which so excluded those who suffered from it both medically and socially. He had a special love for the created world and its creatures. He believed that nature itself was the mirror of God. He gave created forms such names as Brother Sun and Sister Moon. He recognised instinctively that the visible world is an active doorway to the invisible world, the much larger world of the Spirit. He saw that the creation reveals the divine presence. We just need to open our eyes and our minds to see it. Francis walked the earth with his mind in heaven but with his feet firmly on the earth. He saw heaven and earth not as two worlds but one, where everything is connected, and everything belongs.

One of Francis' early followers, the Scottish Oxford academic, John Duns Scotus gave this a theological explanation by saying, in essence, that God's first "idea" was to pour out divine, infinite love into finite, visible forms. The Christ Mystery was the blueprint of reality from the very start. In Jesus we see 'the image of the invisible God' in whom God's original idea and plan take on human form. God is pure Love. And Love by its very nature wants to be one with its beloved, so our salvation has been announced and realised in an incarnate God. The birth and life of Jesus confirmed that the world, human life, and all life, is very good as the Genesis narrative proclaims, and that God loves all that God has created. The coming of Jesus also makes clear that we too, as human beings, are incarnations of the divine nature, with all the potential to reveal the living presence of God in our own lives, with Jesus as our

mentor, model, and example of God's big idea for all humanity. It is the free choice of every human being to accept the divine nature that is within them and to act upon it, but, of course, being human, they are free to ignore or reject it. But those who accept it will come to discover their true self rather than the false and inadequate self that too many are satisfied with or simply do not know who and what they really are.

Jesus came to demonstrate God's life and love in the most intimate way, showing us a better way, how to be fully human and alive. This Franciscan and fully biblical theology rejected the growing mediaeval, honour-based thinking which still has widespread attraction among many western Christians, that Jesus came principally to rescue us from an inherited fallen state supposedly created by the disobedience of our symbolic first parents, Adam and Eve. But the truth is that the great mystery of the Incarnation, of God coming among us, was not motivated by a problem but by love. Jesus was always going to come whether our ancestors messed up or not! His life, teaching, healings, his acts of compassion and forgiveness, all served to demonstrate how close God is to us human beings. The suffering and death of Jesus at the cruel hands of the powers of his day essentially confirm how deep and sacrificial God's love is, how far God would go for us. As God was with Jesus on that cross, so God is with us in our own sufferings and our final breaths. We can therefore live in hope. We can look forward confidently. Physical death means not the end of life but change or transformation; resurrection and renewal are the goal and result of God's love affair with humanity.

As Christians we are called to respond to that love by living more fully and distinctively, as Jesus showed us. Francis once said, "Preach the gospel at all times; and when absolutely necessary, use words." He exemplified the life which Jesus challenged people to live, to live the gospel, not just read or hear it; to give up all those material and cultural things we tend to cling to, but which fail to produce life, like power, self-centredness, posturing, and other misguided priorities and obsessions, as Jesus demanded and said to those who would listen, 'Come, follow me.'

Whenever Church life at any level descends into issues about almost anything but the gospel, it has lost its way. St Francis, among others, remind us of what we are here for. With our lips and through our lives we are called to make our

Lord Jesus Christ known and his presence seen and felt through our words and actions. That will include spreading love and harmony within our church, in our daily lives and among all to whom we relate; in the practice of welcome and hospitality, being able to live and love with disagreement and diversity, living more simply, doing all we can to care for the earth and its creatures, providing friendship to strangers and to those we might have once considered to be 'different,' and to those who are in any kind of need.

Francis made an impact in his world and time by demonstrating in a particular way what a truly Christ-like life looks like. We are not all called to live the kind of ascetic life that he did. But we are all called like him to live and grow in the gospel, to reflect its principles and values, to seek prayerfully and purposefully a specific way or ways to relate our faith to the wider world. This is the way our church worship and membership are going to mean something and have an impact in the sceptical and spiritually impoverished times in which we live. May the example and prayers of our eminent patron lead us to greater holiness and purpose as followers of Jesus. And on a personal level, as I celebrate 40 years as an ordained priest, I believe that, in Francis, I have had no better mentor or exemplar among those who have followed Jesus Christ. So it is an honour and privilege, as well, of course, an inevitable challenge, to have led, and with God's help continue to lead for some time to come, a church dedicated to St Francis of Assisi.