

# **Recapturing St Francis' Form of Life**

Sermon for the Feast of St Francis, Sunday 4 October 2020

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Proverbs 8: 22-31; Psalm 104; Galatians 6: 14-18; Luke 12: 22-32

*+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.*

Two themes that we typically associate with St Francis are his closeness to animals and his love for “Lady Poverty”. But we mustn’t misunderstand what Francis and the Franciscan movement meant by these commitments. It’s easy to be sentimental about Francis preaching to the birds, for instance, or to think that his taming the wolf of Gubbio was like Crocodile Dundee hypnotizing a water buffalo. As for poverty, it wasn’t a matter of fetishizing austerity as other religious orders have done. I remember Mother Teresa visiting Australia and telling the nuns in one of her houses to take the carpet out. I find this unhelpfully self-conscious, and more legalistic than spiritual; I can’t imagine Franciscans thinking that way. If Franciscans happened to live somewhere with a nice carpet, they’d be more likely to appreciate it and enjoy it, though they probably wouldn’t try

to upgrade a threadbare one. Franciscans delight in enjoying good things—in Brisbane, where we had a longstanding community of Anglican Franciscans, we used to joke that they knew all the good restaurants! But my chief impression was that they lived simply, rather than austereley. They saw poverty in terms of freedom rather than obsession with rules.

The reason for that has to do with Francis wanting to restore the life of Christ in his times, in the twelfth century, and the means was his so-called higher poverty. It came down to making a distinction between using things and owning things, especially when owning something meant having the right of usufruct, as it's called: the right to consume or to destroy what you own. The early Franciscans remembered Jesus' teaching about the danger of getting hung up on possessions, preferring life in humble solidarity with all creation. So, Francis and his radical movement took today's Gospel very seriously.

You'll have stumbled upon all this if you've ever read Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, or seen the movie with Sean Connery playing the Franciscan sleuth William of Baskerville, or more recently an excellent TV series with John Turturro in the same role, displaying new logical insights from the early Franciscan scientist Roger Bacon to solve murders during a crucial church council. In *The Name of the Rose* we see the crisis that Franciscans created for a worldly Church and papacy, which simply could not accommodate their ideas about a life without ownership of property. We still can't really make sense of that, can we, in our era when ownership, consumption, waste and destruction are indivisibly linked?

And what the Franciscans concluded about poverty touched on their solidarity with animals as well. Let me briefly explain. The Romans distinguished two forms of life, known by two Greek words: Zoë and Bios. Bios was "bare life," plain biological life, with no official legal status in its own right—the life of animals, for instance, but also the lives of slaves and outlaws who were owed no legal protection. Zoë

entailed status, and typically it involved property ownership. The restriction of voting to male property owners, which lasted well into modern times, continued this older Roman idea that one form of life, Zoë, represented a higher state than mere biological life, Bios.

The Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in a book called *The Highest Poverty*, from his massive nine-volume work *Homo Sacer*, argues that St Francis started this new form of life that harked back to Jesus in the Gospels while pointing forward to a serious contemporary alternative.

Spreading the blessing of Zoë over the uncared-for realm of Bios is a vision that comes with renouncing ownership and domination and consumption in favour of thankful, respectful use. This is why care for people, especially the poor, and care for the environment properly and necessarily belong together—why concerns about jobs and concern about climate change shouldn't be set against each other. St Francis and his movement sought solidarity with the poor and solidarity with nature because they renounced the status of Zoë for the fraternity of Bios—with brother sun, sister

moon, and all the other family members we hear about in the Canticle of St Francis.

Now if all this sounds hippy dippy, and far-fetched, we need to remember that it was Jesus and his suffering love for God's beloved world that guided Francis and his movement. This same Christ came to be regarded as truly cosmic in the teaching of Francis' successor St Bonaventure, the other great theologian of the thirteenth century alongside the Dominican St Thomas Aquinas. Bonaventure's influence inspired the great twentieth-century theologian of evolution Teilhard de Chardin, who saw in this medieval Franciscan tradition a theology for the future.

God's solidarity in Christ with the suffering inherent in creation, crucified among all the victims of natural and human history, lies at the heart of a venerable tradition about St Francis: that he was afflicted with the stigmata. This medieval miracle story, of Francis receiving the mark of the nails in his own hands, is an imaginative testimony to Christ's own crucified love. Here today's words of St Paul in our

epistle find a substantial echo, as Francis too comes to bear the marks of Christ in his own body.

But the stigmata are also a sign that Christ upends the whole calculus of status and entitlement that makes our version of the world go around, since he was prepared to die among the stigmatized, outlawed and accursed. And, by the way, this is also what Francis was emphasising when he introduced the Christmas crib, which we still put out for Midnight Mass, portraying Joseph and Mary, with the newborn Jesus lying among the farm animals in their stall. From the same era as that other great vehicle for religious instruction, the Rosary, the Christmas crib provides a visual reminder to simple people that God loved them and their lives and their farms and their animals—and with that a further reminder to all concerned that God doesn't find his natural home among the Borgias and the Medicis, let alone among the Murdochs and the Trumps.

So, friends, Christians come to the altar today in joyful thankfulness. We come as part of creation with God's

permission to use and enjoy the natural world and its gifts, though not to flaunt our ownership and domination of nature with a dangerously naïve sense of impunity.

In another sermon I'll tell you about the role that medieval Franciscan thought played in shaping our modern scientific ways of thinking, as Franciscans like Roger Bacon, William of Ockham and Duns Scotus turned their attention away from metaphysical forms towards particular things and creatures in the world. Because, friends, it's this very scientific attitude that we should also receive as a gift from God, rather than disrespecting science as the climate change deniers do, worshipping instead their sub-Christian gods of the free market and of hard right extremist ideology.

In closing, perhaps we best remember and celebrate Francis by sharing his simple joy, and by praying for a share in his spiritual freedom. May the Franciscan form of life still bear fruit among us, for a world that needs it to be so.

The Lord be with you ...