

Gentle and Humble in Heart

I don't plan to say very much today – partly because our furry brothers and sisters may become bored – but mostly because St Francis and the readings chosen for this service, call us to pare things back so we can reflect on the pure and simple essentials of life and faith in a spirit of humility.

Francis and his followers sought to live as Christ lived, and the key to this lay in giving up all material wealth. The order founded with Clare of Assisi – a noblewoman inspired by Francis to renounce her life of privilege – is known as “The Poor Clares.” We now use the word poverty to describe a state of unjust economic disadvantage. St Francis was opposed to this suffering sort of poverty, and lived in solidarity with beggars and outcasts, so when he talked of poverty as key to the Christ path, he means rather a chosen path – to be “poor in spirit” is to be free of material encumbrance and pretension. Modern Franciscans, I think, speak more often of living simply. Not only in support of an equitable sharing of wealth, but because living simply frees us to encounter the divine. Thinking of the sermon on the mount – if we are anxious for wealth, do we really see the true riches that have been given us – or come face to face with God in creation and in each person we encounter?

Freed from all that glitters but is not gold, praises burst forth with joy, for we have been given all we need to live a good life. *The Canticle of the Sun* by Francis (on which our first hymn was based) speaks not only of gratitude, but a connection and kinship with all the elements of creation:

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures ... Sir Brother Sun ... Sister Moon and the stars ... Brothers Wind and Air ... Sister Water ... Brother Fire ... Sister, Mother Earth who sustains and governs us” and finally “Sister Death, from whom no-one living can escape.”

Francis also saw, as in Psalm 148, that creation itself praises its maker – “Praise him sun and moon; praise him all you shining stars.” The creatures are seen by Francis to be continually praising God in their very being.

Paired with living simply in harmony with our Sister, Mother Earth, is the virtue of humility. Freed from false pride and self-obsession, the humble of heart can see and rejoice in all that is bigger than themselves – they develop a cosmic awareness and perspective. In the rhetoric of Matthew's gospel – much is hidden from the self-styled wise and intelligent – but revealed to infants – to those who see they have a place in the order of things, but don't assume they can impose control over it – those who strive to understand the world and honour it (the humble scientists and documenters) but also know the limits of their own knowledge (unlike unscrupulous developers and corporations). How much healthier our planet would be today if this mentality held sway – how many deserts would still be green – how many extinct species would still be praising God in their being.

These strands of joyful connection with creation and humility of spirit come together in the tradition of the nativity scene that Francis began - with townspeople gathered by night singing praises in a cave in a forest, and a straw-filled manger for an altar flanked by an ox and a donkey. Incarnation understood not as a past event, but in our midst. Simple. Earthy. Inclusive. Real. A vision for our communities.

To be filled with a spirit of praise and to live a simple life does not protect us from difficulty or pain. But if we are weary, or burdened, or sad, we have only to let down our guard and exercise another kind of humility in seeking our rest in Christ, and in those who hold the Christ light for us. This rest paradoxically means taking a yoke upon ourselves, but as Jesus assures us, it is an easy one – perhaps because it is the one that fits us best. “Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” As we, like Francis and Clare before us, grow into the likeness of our gentle and humble servant God, we can release the heavy burden of self-centred living and find true lightness of being.