

Pentecost 19
7/10/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Lamentations 1:1 – 6
Psalm 137
2 Timothy 1:1 - 14
Luke 17:5 – 10

If you had faith the size of a mustard seed...

The first Hymn was based on the writing of St Francis of Assisi, whose commemoration day is October 4. Dante said of St Francis that in him: “*a sunrise broke upon the world*”. Francis is regarded as the person who, in the last 2000 years, has most fully embodied the teachings of Christ. He was given the title “*the second Christ*”, yet there was no hint of this in his early life. Born in 1182 to a wealthy merchant family, he aspired to be a knight, and as a young gallant led a fairly debauched existence. But from the age of 20 he gradually moved towards a new understanding of himself and his mission in the world. One day at prayer he had a vision of the crucified Christ. He heard the words of the Gospel: “*if anyone would serve me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,*” (Mk 8:34) and realised he was being called to respond. From that time he developed a deep faith in God, a spirit of poverty, a deep sense of humility, and an attitude of profound compassion towards all people and all things. The summons to follow Christ included the specific instruction to “*repair the church*”, which Francis at first took literally. Later (1209) he came to see that his calling was to repair the spiritual life of the church that had grown wealthy, fat and secular, and had corrupted the Gospel standards of discipleship.

Francis did repair the church. He knew himself called to preach the gospel in word and deed, which included a call to poverty. His gift at preaching, his compassion for others such as lepers and the poor, his austerity and his aim to follow Christ in all the details of his life, tapped a deep spiritual hunger. A wave of interest arose and others were drawn to share his pattern of life. First there were five men, then a dozen, then a community of women formed, led by Clare of Assisi. Twenty years later there were thousands, from all walks of life.

Francis’ commitment to poverty struck at the heart of wealth as a source of temporal and ecclesiastical power. He refused to own property. As long as he lived this counter-cultural principle remained, and the brothers ate, slept and travelled as those who had “*nowhere to lay their heads*”. (Matt 8:20) Francis’ level of self-denial was excessive but, like that of an athlete, his aim was to discipline himself for the sake of a higher goal born of God’s love expressed in the Cross of Christ. His quest in self-denial was to maintain an authentic Gospel life, and to emulate Christ’s sufferings. Towards the end of his life he became the first recorded person to manifest the stigmata: the wounds of Christ appeared on his body. Whether caused by miracle or autosuggestion the marks, which in his humility Francis kept secret until his death, testified to the depth of his solidarity with Christ.

Contrary to what it might seem, Francis’ disciplined detachment from the material benefits of life did not mean he hated the body or the material and natural world. He loved all things material and referred to Brother Body, to Mother earth, Brother Wind,

and sister Water. He was known to have preached to a flock of birds, and to have struck a covenant with a wolf that had been causing fear and distress to the people of Gubbio. These stories may have a sense of legend about them, but throughout Christian history seriously holy people have been associated with events that witness to the departure of fear and distrust, and a restoration of a balance reminiscent of humanity's original state. Francis himself was responsible for the rediscovery of the wonders of nature, and introduced into the medieval world a sense of joy in the natural realm, which is almost without precedent.

It is for this reason that St Francis was proposed as the patron saint of Ecologists. Beginning with Rachel Carson's "*Silent Spring*" (1962) scientists, artists, historians, naturalists, farmers... have been sounding the alarm over our treatment of the world shows no reverence or prudence, but their voices have been resisted. In a fashion that is materially and spiritually unsustainable a relentless tide of interests is plundering resources without sufficient regard for the cost to the whole. Many have come to believe a counter force of moral and spiritual conviction is needed. For this reason, in 1986 a multi faith conference was convened at Assisi, because St Francis was seen as a mentor. His undivided love for God, the world and its people, stood in the way of unlimited self-seeking, and made a miraculous difference to the lives of many. He was a mustard seed, through whom the power of God was enabled to achieve much.

It may be that in following his example we shall find help. But the thing to see is that to follow Francis we have to listen to and have faith in the one in whom he put his trust. In the Gospel for today, when the disciples asked Jesus for faith he said: *If you had faith the size of a mustard seed... you could move this mulberry tree.* His rather baffling reply may do us good if it leads us to ponder what this really means, and whether we have that smidgeon of faith.

The biblical noun *faith* is associated with the verb *to believe* and denotes *a right relationship with God*. To have faith is to confidently trust God, who reaches out to us with steadfast concern to liberate and bring life. In the Gospels to have faith is to trust in the God whose resources have moved towards us in the preaching, teaching and healing of Jesus. Wherever he goes the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and sinners are forgiven. But it is not that these things are rewards for believing Jesus. It is a consequence of being able to trust the life he offers, and therefore go forward in a totally different way. For the lame to step out and walk, and for the sinful to accept forgiveness *is* the expression faith. It involves choosing to cleave to the power of God, which is being offered, despite weakness of body or will. To take this step involves being willing to forgo self-interest and transcend any fears or barriers that may have been built up in us. The power to do this comes from love received, power which makes it possible to emulate the qualities found in God, exactly as Francis did in his life. In him, as some would say, we saw faith and church expressed as they are meant to be. In this sense, that is the meaning of the second saying in today's reading. Those who trust the power of life, do what they are called to do, without a second thought, or quest for recognition.

The self-interest we are called to turn away from is key, and has many forms. In a church and context besotted with wealth and power Francis insisted on the total abandonment of money and wealth, and would not tolerate a search for personal glory. William James argues that while a person says they love God, but keeps

something in reserve, as in maintaining a secret love for wealth or glory, the surrender of faith is incomplete: a vital crisis is not passed, and fear still rules the soul. Surrender to a different power at the centre - the power of love - is what makes it possible to be ruthless and reckless in self-abandonment, which is a sign fear, is conquered and a higher safety has arrived.

It is true that we need all the help we can get if we are going to be able to learn to tread lightly on our land, and discontinue the things which put the whole human and ecological project in doubt. It is not just for his love of the earth that we might look afresh to St Francis today. He leads us beyond to one who, in suffering and self-giving offers us a greater love, which has the power to quench our appetite for self-seeking, and turn us out from ourselves. As we grapple with the challenge of living with the spirit of our age, there are deep possibilities for redemption here. May we be bold in seeking them out, and embracing them, to the glory of God, and in thanksgiving for the testimony of the life of St Francis.