

Reflection on Sunday 17 September 2023 by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship



Keep it simple (inspired by St Francis of Assisi)

Last week, I was standing by a lake in Tuscany. It was a beautiful day – blue sky, hot sun, no wind. I was talking to my wife Jenny when, suddenly, I couldn't hear what she was saying because a flight of swallows started swirling and shrieking above us, darting backwards and forwards and making a heck of a noise. Despite my delight in the joy of nature, I felt quite irritated by these birds at that moment.

And then I thought of St Francis of Assisi. He was reputedly preaching one day, when a flight of swallows started making their hullabaloo above him. His audience couldn't hear him, so he politely asked the birds to be quiet... and they shut up. St Francis clearly had a way with the birds.

Jenny and I were staying in a town called Cortona, which sounds like my first car. In fact, there were similarities between Cortona last week and my old Cortina 40 years ago – both were shabby, noisy and occupied by people who liked drinking wine and beer.

No, I'm being unfair to the historic Italian town. It does boast over 85 restaurants and bars, but the food is of a particularly high standard, the local wines are splendid and the medieval architecture – the churches and halls – are not shabby but display a dignified legacy of historical culture. Many of the churches contain fine Renaissance paintings. It's a great, cultural place to stay and is surrounded by a rolling landscape, vineyards, olive groves and the hilltop towns for which Tuscany is famous.

The swallows were not the only reason I was thinking about St Francis. Close to Cortona is the town of Assisi, famous, of course, as the birthplace of St Francis 800 years ago. It is still the nerve centre for the order of Franciscan Friars that the saint established in 1209.

Having visited Assisi and experienced the aesthetic simplicity of the Basilica and the chapels and gardens there, I have been re-educating myself about St Francis. He is most commonly known for his rapport with birds, animals and nature, but there's much more to his life and character than that.

His faith was inspired by Christ's instructions to the Disciples when they went off in pairs to spread the word, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel: *'Heal the sick, drive out demons... and don't take any gold or silver or copper with you in your belts and no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff'*.

In other words, keep it simple.

In trying to emulate the Disciples, Francis would have appreciated the attributes of God in Psalm 103, which serve as a potential template for our own lives: *'Forgive iniquities... heal diseases... show loving kindness and tender mercies... execute righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed... be merciful and gracious... be slow to anger and abound in mercy'*.

Francis was the son of a wealthy merchant. He grew up in relative luxury and was well-educated. But he was a bit of a lad; he enjoyed fine clothes, partying and drinking. By all accounts he was good looking, gallant and witty. In 1202, he got caught up in a petty war with the neighbouring region of Umbria and spent a year in prison. It was here that he began to change his attitude to life.

He returned to Assisi and picked up his old ways. But when he planned to join the fighting of another local skirmish, unfortunately for him, or rather, luckily for us, God had other ideas. One day out of Assisi and Frank had a vision and

suddenly changed his mind. He returned to the town and slowly began to change his life. He gave away his riches and money, he clothed himself in a rough tunic, went barefoot and started preaching the values of godly simplicity and directness. He vowed to lead a life of poverty, chastity and obedience to God. *'Appreciate the world around you,'* he said.

Within a year, he had nearly a dozen like-minded followers, so he went straight to the Pope in Rome and asked for permission to set up an order of friars. The Franciscan order grew; the rough-clothed monks went out and about, preaching in the countryside. They were cheerful and happy and popular for their good deeds, their poverty, and their humbleness.

In many ways, St Francis' life mirrors that of Christ. Both were rather insignificant men who wandered around small villages preaching to whoever would listen. They didn't have any political power and did not lead armies into battle. And yet they made a huge impact on the people they met and changed the world.

The unexpected way St Francis changed the world was through his example. His revolutionary way of thinking was, and is, so radically simple that anyone could and can do it.

800 years on, he is a saint for the modern world. To read his prayers, to understand his philosophy of life, is to hear his call to rediscover something of the joy, wonder and thankfulness for

creation, something which many of us did to some extent in lockdown, but which we have lost again as life's complications, busyness and hurriedness have returned.

We may not be called to give up all our possessions like St Francis and beg for food and somewhere to sleep, but we can follow his example and try and prioritise a life of simple values, being content with what we have, not wanting more all the time, not worrying about the unknown of tomorrow, not shouting at swallows, even though they irritate us, but appreciating their difference and joy.

Taking a summer holiday, reading about St Francis, has made me realise that Christianity is preached most effectively by individuals passing their faith on to others by example.

So, I leave you with St Francis of Assisi's most famous prayer:

Simple Prayer

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

As the friar from Assisi often encouraged his followers: Start by thinking about what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible. Amen