

Sermon on Sunday 4 October 2020

By Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Readings: Psalm 148; Luke 9. 1-6)

St Francis of Assisi

When I was at primary school many (many) years ago, we were told a famous story, which ignited our imaginations as children. There's this medieval town in Italy called Gubbio. And outside the town lives a wolf. The wolf starts to terrorise the townspeople; it attacks their livestock, it attacks the people themselves. The situation starts to deteriorate until it reaches the point where the people of Gubbio refuse to leave the town for fear of the beast outside.

Then along comes this monk; a friar. He hears about the wolf and says, 'Well, this won't do', and he goes out to talk to the wolf. The wolf sees the friar and leaps forward, snarling. The friar remains calm; he makes the sign of a cross, and the wolf lies down at his feet. (It's rather like that scene in the film, where Crocodile Dundee points his fingers at the eyes of a ferocious dog and the dog goes quiet.)

The monk talks to the wolf. He says, *'You've been a very naughty wolf. You've not only been eating the animals around here; you've been attacking the people. Now, man is created in the image of God and God doesn't like it if you eat men, so this has to stop.'* And then the Friar makes a pact with the wolf. The wolf stops attacking the people, in return the people feed the wolf. Peace returns to the town of Gubbio. It's a great story. We loved hearing it, particularly the bit where the wolf lifts up its paw to shake the friar's hand.

The monk or the friar is, of course, St Francis of Assisi. And, today – the 4th of October – is the feast day of St Francis.

Francis lived in 12th Century Italy and died on 4 October 795 years ago. He grew up in relative wealth and was a bit of a wild child. He

was known for drinking and partying. He became a soldier and was captured and imprisoned. It was during his time in prison that God came to him in visions. When he was released, he renounced his old life and chose to answer God's call to live in poverty and work to repair the church.

He took as his guiding principle the text we heard in today's Gospel. Jesus sends his disciples out to proclaim the Kingdom of God, he tells them: *'Take nothing for the journey - no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt.'*

And that's what Francis did. He chose to be poor; he chose to live among the marginalised, the suffering, the disfigured, just as Christ had done.

Italy at that time was going through a phase of rapid social change. Towns were growing and a monetary economy was emerging, there were power struggles between the old families and a new merchant class; there were wars between city states, and the ordinary people, the peasants, the workers, the poor - as always - were caught in the middle.

The church was finding it difficult to respond to these changes and when God said to Francis in a vision 'Repair my church', he didn't mean 'fix the local steeple' but reach out to my people as my son Christ did.

So Francis travelled, often with one companion; he preached down-to-earth sermons, he founded an order of monks - the Franciscan Friars - who led a basic life of poverty.

But that wasn't all. Francis not only believed that *every* person was important, that even poor people mattered, he also saw the whole of nature as a mirror of God. He called animals his sisters and brothers. The wolf story is just one example of his ability to include all living creatures. He preached to the birds and the birds listened.

And this ability to respond to animals and nature is why Francis became the patron saint of animals. It's no coincidence that his feast day is also international World Animal Day, when we are urged to think about how important animals are to this planet; when we should take the opportunity to consider animal welfare worldwide, to think about cruelty-free shopping, compassionate cosmetics and that sort of thing. When we should take a moment to celebrate our pets.

There was a time when, on the Sunday closest to St Francis' Day, congregations would bring their pets and animals into church. And why not? We've heard several times during this period of Creationtide - and before that, during Lockdown when many people had the opportunity to re-connect with nature and the birds in their garden - that animals are an important part of the Kingdom that God created on Earth. So, let's enjoy them.

Sure, animals remind us that our relationship with God is not just about us and God. It includes all of creation. Creation proclaims the glory and love of God and, in an age of climate change and environmental degradation, to see our responsibility to the earth as part of what it means to follow Jesus, is very important. God is watching us and waiting for us to take action.

That is the most obvious lesson that we learn from the life of St Francis of Assisi. Nature is important. But, there is another aspect of this well-loved saint's life that is equally important.

When we think about the life of St Francis, when we consider the way he chose to live, we are reminded that every time we choose to stand with those with whom Jesus stood; when we reject violence and greed and harm in favour of peace and generosity and healing, we are answering the same call God made to St Francis.

Every time we choose to stand among the marginalised, the suffering, the disfigured, just as Christ did (and his spirit does now),

we are answering God's call. It's the choice that Francis made. Francis wanted to make a difference.

We may think it was easier for him in medieval Italy and it's difficult for us to apply his principles in the value system of the modern world, but the complex time when Francis lived was, to him, the modern world. It was no less difficult for him then as it is for us now to stand up and say, 'I will do what I can to change the way things are.'

St Francis valued creation and everything in the world. He did it then and his example is remembered 795 years later. **He turned belief into action.** If we turn what we believe God is calling us to do in all the areas where Christ set us an example: caring about nature, caring about the planet, feeding the poor, enjoying the simple things in life - if we turn that belief in caring into action, maybe we will be remembered individually or, more importantly, we can be remembered collectively in 795 years' time as the generation that respected the creation and helped turn things round.

It's up to us. We all have to take responsibility for the things that matter to God. In my limited experience and through countless illustrations in the Bible, I believe God enjoys words but he likes action better. We need to walk the talk, as St Francis of Assisi did.

Amen

