

Marking the 800th anniversary of Francis' of Assisi's Death – 4.10.26

GALATIANS 6:14-18; Matthew Chapter 11.25-30

AIM: “What would happen if I actually took Jesus seriously?”

Living on the edge on the inside of the Church.

Francis hears Christ,
encounters Christ at the edge,
returns to Scripture,
and then lives the Gospel in a way that inspires, shapes and reforms the Church.

Talk

There is something surprising about Jesus in the Gospel today. He thanks God that the things of God have been hidden from “the wise and the intelligent” and revealed instead to “infants”.

Yet, surely wisdom is a good thing and intelligence is a gift? The Church has always needed people who can think deeply about the faith. So what is Jesus getting at?

Despite his miracles and teaching, people in the Galilean cities were complaining that he was not the sort of Messiah they were looking for. He is facing increasing opposition and disquiet as he proclaims the things of God – “the Kingdom of heaven.”

Thus Jesus prays: I thank you, Father because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants – to “little ones”. Accepting Jesus is not based on a formal theological education – but is knowledge that is **revealed to those who are still capable of receiving it: to those who have an open heart, as much as an open mind.**

And that is a good place to begin to think about St Francis.

Eight hundred years after his death, we remember Francis as one of the great saints of the Church. Yet Francis did not set out to become a great saint. Nor did he begin with a plan to reform the medieval Church.

He began with a much simpler question:

What would happen if I took Jesus seriously?

That simple question proved to be both disruptive and transformative.

Francis was born into a wealthy merchant family. He knew comfort, ambition and status. And then something began to change.

At the age of 23, while praying in the dilapidated church of San Damiano, he heard a voice calling him: “Francis, can you not see that my house is falling into ruin? Go and repair my house for the love of me!”

Although at first, he took this to mean literally re-building the little church, he soon realised that maybe a much larger reform of the Church was needed.

Now Francis was neither a theologian, nor a priest. He was a Christian who came to Scripture by first meeting people living on the margins – and there meeting Christ. Those encounters drew him back to the Bible. **He began to hear the words of Jesus not as ideas to be discussed, but as words to be lived. The idea of re-building the Church, began with re-building Francis himself.**

He described one encounter with a group of leprosy sufferers, as a turning point in his life.

When he met them, he wanted to run away. Instead, he drew near to offer help and comfort, something that would have been unheard of in his day for fear of catching leprosy. He wrote in his “Testament” that “the Lord led me among them... and then I stayed only a short while and **left the World.**”

The world had taught Francis to see someone with leprosy, as one to avoid. **The Gospel** taught him to see a human being — and, beyond that, to see Christ. When we begin to follow Jesus seriously, **our vision changes – we hold a different vantage point often on the edge.** We begin to notice people we have overlooked and we begin to ask: Who is carrying a burden? Who is weary? **Which takes us to Jesus’ invitation in our Gospel today: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”**

Jesus doesn’t say, “Come to me when you have sorted yourself out and are respectable – or have a master’s in theology” He simply says: “Come to me.” **Francis heard that invitation and moved towards the people society had pushed away.**

He moved towards those suffering with leprosy, those in poverty, those who are forgotten and overlooked. He moved towards simplicity, towards the margins. **As he moved towards pain and struggle, he met Christ there – the one who had relinquished control and who had been handed over to suffer and die on a cross. The one who shares in all our suffering. As Paul wrote in Galatians: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

Yet Francis did not walk away from the Church. He loved the Church and wanted to live the Gospel as a child of the Church, yet very much on its edge. **He lived inside the Church, on the edge.**

That is an important place for reform, through people who love the Church enough to live the Gospel in a way that will ask loving and difficult questions of it. **Rocking the Boat from within rather than jumping ship!**

Francis did not begin by asking: “How shall I reform the institution?” He asked: **“How shall I follow Jesus?” And that became reform. Sometimes the most powerful reform is not an argument. It is a life.**

A life that makes another way of living visible and quietly asks: What if we really believed this? What if we really believed that the poor are our brothers and sisters? That Christ is encountered among those whom society rejects? That greatness means becoming a servant? That simplicity can bring freedom? That peace begins with us?

Francis's reform began with the Gospel becoming flesh in his own life. In Galatians, Paul says: "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body." Paul is speaking about the cost of discipleship, that following Christ leaves marks. It changes us. It costs us something.

Francis would later become associated with the story of the stigmata — the wounds of Christ appearing on his body. Whatever we make of the stigmata, long before the physical marks, Francis' life already bore Christ's marks. His own poverty. His love for those in poverty. His humility. His willingness to cross boundaries. His joy. (Francis was known for his sunny, charismatic and joyful demeanour). His love for the Church.

Discipleship leaves marks. I wonder what are the marks that following Christ have left on us – thus far? Maybe they are not physical marks – but marks in how we spend our money, how we speak about other people, in whom we welcome, in what we are prepared to give away. Marks in the way we treasure and treat creation. Marks in our willingness to forgive and let go.

Thus the Gospel (the Good News of the Kingdom) becomes visible in us. Paul argued that "Neither [*the marks of*] circumcision nor uncircumcision are anything; but a new creation is everything." **A new creation** is what Francis was seeking. He did not seek a slightly improved version of the old life. But lives made new in Christ.

The Saints are not given to the Church simply to be admired. **They are given to disturb and inspire us. So Francis asks us today:**

Where have we become too comfortable? Where have we stopped noticing? Where have we confused knowing *about* Jesus with *following* Jesus? And, perhaps most importantly:

Where is Christ waiting for us at the edge? Wherever people walk into church and feel like an outsider, people who are lonely, grieving, whose faith is uncertain or their experience of Church has been painful. Where maybe the Church has placed heavy burdens on them.

And Jesus says: "Come to me."

May our churches be humble enough to listen, to go to the edge, to notice the weary and welcome those who do not quite fit, including ourselves!

Francis set out to follow Jesus – and in so doing his life asked the Church **"What does it mean to take Jesus seriously?"** Reform followed.

Let's take this question to heart for ourselves and the Church today.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, as we survey your cross, make us:

humble enough to receive you,

courageous enough to go to the edge,

attentive enough to see those we have overlooked,

and willing to carry the marks of your love in our own lives.

So that the Church today may be a place where the weary find rest, the outsider finds welcome, those who are poor find dignity, and the world catches a glimpse of Christ.

Amen.