

4th October 2020 – Francis of Assisi – Pet Sunday – Chris’s Sermon

Well, here we are again – my second St Francis day service in the parish of Bayswater. You may have noticed that I tend to celebrate this particular feast day with great enthusiasm and joy. There is something joyful about these services. (Would you agree.) They can also be quite surprising and chaotic as well. In a broad sense, these services encourage us to share our blessings – to be playful and spontaneous. Yes, I love these services because they have the power to carry us back to the wonder and delight of childhood. Well, this is true for me.

Growing up in the church, I loved to take my dog to church once a year – to be blessed. He was a great dog. Like your former rector, my dog was part Labrador (but he was also part whippet). My dog was my friend – he was good company. And, the feast of St Francis celebrates the relationship that we share with our pets. Would you agree - Yes?

Along with our pets – our furry and feathered friends, today we also celebrate the life and ministry of St Francis. As I’ve said on other occasions, St Francis was passionate about Christ – he modelled his life and faith on the example of Christ. Put simply, the love of Christ helped him to understand and order his own life – his priorities and his work - his love and passion.

And, I think the integrity of Christ (along with St Francis) can find a home in us as well– it helps us to understand who we are, as disciples of Christ – it grounds our faith.

Now, having said this, I think I’m also a Christian because God speaks to the world through Christ and people like St Francis. God has offered wisdom and guidance to countless millions, down through the centuries – through the example of Christ and St Francis. Through Christ and his disciples, God has fed the poor and clothed the naked and healed the sick and bound up the broken. God has inspired and blessed countless millions.

And, I think we might be called to tell a similar story. Through Christ and people like St Francis, God helps us to grow and mature in our faith – and we are called then to make our own contribution to the good news.

I think St Francis would probably agree with this viewpoint.

St Francis was born in Assisi Italy in 1181. He was the son of a rich cloth merchant – a soldier – a worldly man.

But, while in prison in Perugia, he discovered the teachings of Christ in a very personal way. Some argue that he had a conversion experience, like Paul meeting Christ on the road to Damascus. But, regardless of how it happened, somehow he discovered the love and passion of Christ. Somehow, while in that terrible and lonely place, he was deeply moved by the gospels – the example that Jesus.

We’re told that St Francis adopted the Gospels as the rule for his life. In other words, he adopted Christ as his example. He dressed in rough clothes, he gave away his wealth and allowed himself to become dependent on the love and charity of others. Yes, he was a man of deep faith. He became dependent on God’s goodness.

He visited hospitals and served the sick. He preached the good news in the streets and accepted all men and women as his brothers and sisters. His ministry – his example was so powerful that he started to attract followers. And, with the blessing of the pope, he founded the Franciscans in 1209.

During his life, he lived with animals, worked with his hands, cared for lepers, cleaned churches and sent food to thieves.

Today, he's recognised as a man who lived out the story of Christ. From humble beginnings as a very ordinary man – a very flawed man, St Francis discovered grace and truth in his life.

As I've said on other occasions, he wears a number of different hats – he's the patron saint of animals and animal welfare societies. He's the patron saint of the environment and environmentalism. He's the patron saint of families and firefighters and peace and zoos. He's also the patron saint of tapestry workers and merchants and those who die alone.

Yes, the life and ministry of St Francis echoes the life and ministry of Christ. And, if we could ask St Francis why he is a Christian, I think he would talk about the example of Christ and the work of the church.

He would probably talk about the experience of God – a call to contribute to the Good News, made possible by the example of Christ's life.

So today, as we give thanks for the life and ministry of St Francis, I hope we will be mindful of the life that we share with God, when Christ truly becomes the cornerstone of our lives – when Christ becomes the cornerstone of everything that we do, say and believe. Today, we are reminded that we become part of the story that God shares with the world – we become part of the good news.

Like Christ and St Francis, we too are called to serve – to feed the poor and befriend the lonely – we are called to be forgiving, generous and understanding.

If I can, 'd like to finish today with the prayer of St Francis – the prayer of our faith – the prayer of those who want to serve and live out the story of Christ – this is the gospel

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;

And, where there is sadness, joy.

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.

The Lord be with you.