

Morningside

10/09/2017

Brother of the poor, talker with birds. St Francis.

40 degrees in Assisi, surrounded by the loveliest hills and wooded valleys in Italy. For health reasons it was important to have at least one ice-cream cone every day. We were living in a convent, being looked after by nuns. These nuns were from a Swedish order, but nearly all of them were Indians. They spoke little English, but they managed to convey generosity and kindness of welcome.

Picture us on our last night. Twenty-five Scots gathered for a farewell party to say thanks to those who had looked after us. All ten nuns were present: they had cooked and served and cleaned for us for ten days. Although they had little English, and none of us had any Tamil, we knew they had been generous and kind. At the party there were speeches and stories and recitations – what the nuns made of some of this I cannot guess! – and then it was time to part. But the nuns asked if we could have their special favourite at the very end. I was expecting “Auld Lang Syne” But no. We all formed a big circle and began – with great enthusiasm from everyone – “You put your right hand in ...You do the Hokey Cokey and you turn around”. Farewell Assisi.

Not that I left Morningside for two Sundays merely for fun and games. No indeed! St Francis was never far from my thoughts in Assisi. It would be difficult for him to be far from anyone’s thoughts in Assisi. The town is much smaller than I expected – not much bigger than Musselburgh – and every lane and every little hill, of which there are plenty, has some shrine or church associated with Francis.

If ever there was a playboy it was Francesco Bernadone. He was born into money and he had plenty of friends to help him spend it. But everything changed when he saw a vision and heard a voice. A voice which said to him “Francis, my church is in ruins, rebuild my church”. His new passion for reforming the church, and helping himself to his father’s money to do it, led to a great quarrel with his father and a completely new life for Francis. He abandoned his family wealth, he abandoned his old way of life: and he turned to new ways. From now on, for the rest of his life, he was a man cheerfully embracing poverty, powerfully proclaiming peace, and using every scrap of energy and prayer to tell of the loveliness of Christ.

Everyone loved him. And he loved everyone. It was said of Archbishop William Temple, a great leader of the Church of England, that he loved the whole human race – except those whom he knew personally! Francis was the exact opposite. I'm not sure that he had much of a concept of the whole human race but he burst out with love with everyone he met. Happy, tender, compassionate, sensitive love – for everyone. Love for the brothers in the order he founded. Love for his disciple Claire, who followed him in following Christ, and herself founded an order of nuns, the Poor Clares. Francis bubbling over with love for those he once feared most, for the dreaded lepers of Assisi, for whom he had a special care. And most of all, Francis the brother of the poor.

He chose to live in poverty, as one of the lowest in society, and he worked hard as a day labourer. This was tough, menial, low-paid work, yet he never passed a collection plate when he preached, nor asked the public for money. When the present Pope was elected, he chose the name Francis in honour of Francis of Assisi; and he said he did so because he wanted the church to become a church for the poor.

Francis loved everyone he met, and they loved him. But it wasn't just people. He loved, so the story goes, a fierce wolf that was terrorizing the nearby town of Gubbio, and persuaded this great beast to enter into a deal with the townspeople that it would no longer attack them and they would always provide it with food and shelter. He loved the birds. More than that, he seemed to love the very leaves on the trees, the flowers in the field, the sun, the moon, the stars. We began this service with his famous hymn:

All creatures of our God and King, lift up your hearts and with us sing.

No wonder Francis is called the patron saint of animals. On St Francis Day, the 4th of October, some churches hold special services of blessing for pets.

Francis' love for all creatures goes deeper than affection. In his great hymn he is asking the whole created world and all its creatures to join him in praising God. All of them, the sun, the sea, the birds, the trees, he thinks of not simply as creatures, but as his own fellow-creatures living together in God's world. So he invites them to join him in what they were created for, the praise of God. Perhaps there was only one before Francis, and perhaps none since, with such a close relationship with the whole created world. Maybe alone in the stories of Jesus do

you sense as keen a recognition of the human race and the animal kingdom belonging together. Think of the stories and sayings of Jesus about birds – like the one we read this morning – and flowers and seeds and trees and sheep and so on. Francis was following in the steps of his master.

Climb the hill with me, the hill that leads from the convent in Assisi up to the great church, which bears the name of Francis. It is really three churches, built on top of each other. Their great glory is the world-famous frescoes by the master painter Giotto, scenes from the life of Francis. One of the most famous is of Francis and the birds: it is on the cover of the order of service.

The story is that Francis was going through a crisis. Should he retire from the world and live as a hermit; or should he go about and preach. He prayed and he asked his friends and the overwhelming response was clear: go and preach. He was overjoyed by this message and went on his way singing, with the burden lifted from his heart. He was to preach. And almost immediately he met a great crowd of ... Birds! So what did he do? He preached to the birds. Listen to what his companions remembered about that sermon:

My little sisters the birds, you owe much to God, your Creator, and you ought to sing his praise at all times and in all places, because he has given you liberty to fly about into all places; and though you neither spin nor sew, he has given you clothing for yourselves and your offspring. He has given you fountains and rivers to quench your thirst, mountains and valleys in which to take refuge, and trees in which to build your nests; so that your Creator loves you much. Beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praise to God.

Is that not just inspired? – beautiful and brilliant!

While I was thinking of this sermon in Assisi, I was planning a sermon about Francis and the poor, about Francis and the birds, and about the great church with the wonderful frescoes. And in the midst of this I was given a gift. For a new friend of mine, a companion on the tour, whom I see here in the congregation this morning, gave me a poem. It is a poem which draws together all these thoughts of mine perfectly. The Edinburgh poet Norman McCaig wrote it: it is called "Assisi".

*The dwarf with his hands on backwards
sat, slumped like a half-filled sack
on tiny twisted legs from which
sawdust might run,
outside the three tiers of churches built
in honour of St Francis, brother
of the poor, talker with birds, over whom
he had the advantage
of not being dead yet.*

*A priest explained
how clever it was of Giotto
to make his frescoes tell stories
that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness
of God and the suffering
of His Son. I understood
the explanation and
the cleverness.*

*A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,
fluttered after him as he scattered
the grain of the Word. It was they who had passed
the ruined temple outside, whose eyes
wept pus, whose back was higher
than his head, whose lopsided mouth
said Grazie in a voice as sweet
as a child's when she speaks to her mother
or a bird's when it spoke
to St Francis.*

Amen