

2 October 2015

Together in Creation – Reflection for Third Order Franciscans (Luke 12. 22-34)

Sarah Bachelard

It's an honour to share this service of Holy Communion with you as part of this gathering of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis. Our theme is 'Together in Creation' – it's a theme, of course, dear to Francis's own heart. In his extraordinary Canticle of the Sun, Francis expresses his profound sense of being together with – even being in communion with – creation. He proffers creation's praise to God from his place within the web of life, as a creature among creatures, one who speaks as a brother for those without words. 'Be praised my Lord, through all your creatures', he sings: be praised by Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Mother Earth.

It's possible to sentimentalize Francis – I'm thinking of some of those misty devotional pictures of him preaching to the birds, perpetually full of the joys of spring. But this Canticle's expression of his experience of radical relatedness with creation invites us to recognise there's something much deeper going on – something that holds promise, I think, for transforming our relationship with God's good earth and with our own creatureliness. I want to explore what this deeper thing might be.

As you well know, Francis was the son of a wealthy merchant who grew up to become a soldier and man about town. A pivotal episode in his conversion was his stripping himself naked in the public square of his home town, discarding (much to his father's consternation) his costly garments. This gesture of stripping is profoundly significant.

On the one hand, Francis is saying 'yes' to poverty, to the creaturely condition of absolute dependence on God. Whatever illusions we might cherish that we can secure

ourselves and our identities, the real truth is that ultimately our lives are gift. We cannot hold onto them as possessions. Our conversion and growth involves recognising and embracing this, our essential poverty; it calls for entrusting ourselves entirely to God's goodness, God's provision. This is the same poverty and poverty of spirit to which Jesus is exhorting his disciples in our reading from Luke's gospel: 'do not be afraid, little flock', do not cling to illusory securities of your own. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses knit of your trust in God, for God knows what you need.

Francis's gesture of stripping also signifies his 'yes' to the nakedness which is the heart of humility. To be humble is not self-conscious abasement or false modesty, but the willingness to be simply ourselves, unadorned and unashamed. Humility is about being grounded, of the earth. Francis instructed that when he died he was to be stripped naked once more and laid flat upon the bare ground – so that he might embrace Sister 'bodily death', at one with the earth from whence he came. Remember O mortal you are dust, and to dust you will return.

So poverty and humility – the heart of Franciscan spirituality. And it's here, I think, that the possibility of radical solidarity with all creatures, and with creation itself, is sourced. To know your life as gift and not possession, means there's nothing to defend and nowhere else to get. And to consent to be simply a creature alongside all the other creatures, no better and no worse than anyone else, means discovering ourselves part of what poet Mary Oliver calls 'the family of things'. Poverty and solidarity; humility and belonging – they go together. The leper, formerly feared and despised, becomes one who can be embraced; the lives of all that lives are connected to mine. This is why Francis's ecological sensibility, his sense of deep belonging the web of life, is no easy, sentimental piety. It's the fruit of his radical acceptance of his own creatureliness; it's the expression of his *practice* of dependence upon and nakedness before God.

And here's where Francis has something deeply significant to offer our age, as we face *our* ecological crisis. For, at bottom, the source of our crisis is our alienation from our creatureliness and our refusal of vulnerability. It's connected to our fear of poverty and death, our desperate attempt to make ourselves secure, to make ourselves matter, by means of possessions, prestige and aggression, at the expense our fellow human beings, of the earth and sea, and all that dwells therein. It's true that from where we are now, to heal earth's wounds will require all kinds of expertise – scientific, political, legal, economic. But unless we also address our fundamental alienation and its destructive consequences, little will ultimately change.

And this means that a community like this one has much to offer for the healing of the world. For learning *how* to let go false sources of security and identity takes courage and it takes practice – spiritual practices like giving up the illusion of self-dependence, like deep listening and attention to what is not us, and the daily choice to entrust our lives to God. We are led into and sustained in these practices by way of prayer, and pre-eminently contemplative prayer. For it's only as we make space for the silent working in and through us of the Spirit of God, that we are led to deepened acceptance of our poverty and creatureliness, and begin to realise our inalienable belonging to the whole.

When a community such as this embarks on this adventure of spirit, we become witnesses, as Francis bore witness, as Christ bore witness, to the possibility of being human in a new way – our lives sourced in the energy of compassion, gratitude and non-possessiveness rather than scarcity and threat. Like Francis, we join our grief and our praise with that of all that lives on the face of the earth. We become participants in the ministry of reconciliation at the level of creation itself. And so my prayer for each of you is that you may be renewed by this gathering to give yourselves over, as recklessly and joyfully as St Francis did, to this vitalising work of love.