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The Feast of St Francis (Luke 10: 38-42)

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Thank you for joining with me in this reflection on the life of St Francis whose feast we celebrate tonight. Pope Francis writes this tribute to him in *Laudato Si*, his encyclical on the environment:

*I do not want to write this encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that St Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable, and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically... He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. ... He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and inner peace.*¹

This is a hard act to follow. I find myself wondering about the man behind the saint. Interestingly enough Francis asked himself the same question – not about being a saint but about who he was as a man. Apparently one of his brothers overheard him praying throughout the night: ‘Who are you O God, and who am I?’ Like other mystics, he understood that the search for God and the search for his deepest self are two sides to the one coin. But unlike Augustine of Hippo, Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich, he has not left behind a first person account of his spiritual journey. We must glean what we can from his biographers, his Rule of Life, a few pastoral letters, his Testament and his canticles or songs of praise. Even the familiar prayer, ‘Lord, make me an instrument of your peace’, often attributed to Francis, is a 20th Cent composition, although it is in harmony with what we do know about his life and teachings.

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On care for our common home*, 2015.

Richard Rohr, a contemporary Franciscan, tells us:

*In his Testament [Francis] says, 'No one told me what I ought to do', and at the end of his life he says, 'I have done what is mine to do, now you must do yours'*²

'No one told me what I ought to do... I have done what is mine to do, now you must do yours.' Like his, 'Who are you, O God, and who am I?', these words have an eerily contemporary ring, and somehow find and challenge us. At least they do me.

The man we have come to know as Francis of Assisi was born in 1181-2 to a wealthy cloth merchant family. As a young man, Francis had romantic dreams of becoming a knight and troubadour. The beginning of the 13th C. obligingly offered plenty of opportunities for experience on the battlefield. This was the time of the fifth Crusade between Christians and Muslims in Europe, and within Italy, war between city states. After being wounded in the war between Assisi and Perugia, followed by a lengthy time in prison, he fell seriously ill. In the opening sequence of Franco Zeffereilli's visually beautiful, if somewhat romanticised film, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, we see Francis undergoing what seems to be a near death experience which included flashbacks to the war. When he recovers he is much changed and his parents and others question his sanity.

His biographers report that on one occasion he passed a leper whom he would have previously shunned from fear, but instead he embraced and kissed him. It is certainly a powerful image of his willingness to embrace the most marginalised – akin to Mother Teresa's holding in her arms the destitute and dying of the streets of Kolkata.

One day in the ruined church of San Damiano outside Assisi, he heard Jesus say to him, 'Francis rebuild my church, which you see is falling into ruins.' At first he took this literally, financing the project by stealing a horse and expensive cloth from his father. Unsurprisingly, this endeared him to neither his father nor the bishop, before whom his incensed parent had dragged him. At this point he strips off his clothes,

² Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of St Francis of Assisi*, 2014,

hands over the money, dons a rough tunic and goes off to embrace a life of poverty and simplicity in solidarity with the most marginalised of his society.

Others gradually joined him to form an order of mendicant friars. Not only did Francis reject secular wealth and privilege to embrace a life of extreme poverty, his Rule also forbade hierarchical privilege within the order. Ordination was discouraged – instead of vestments he wore a cloak patched on the outside. Even the possession of books was seen as a potential source of inequality among the brothers, many of whom were illiterate. Initially he and his fellow friars lived in disused church buildings or in caves, or depended on any hospitality that came their way. His Rule was an attempt to translate the poverty of the beatitudes into a way of life. In every way joining the friars was a deliberate choice of downward social mobility.

Francis maintained his devotion to Lady Poverty right to the end. When he died 4 October 1226 at age 44, he was buried, as he had wished, on the rubbish tip outside the town walls.³ I wonder what he would have made of the magnificent three level basilica that was to be erected over his burial site.

By all accounts, Francis walked the talk. He told his brothers, 'It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.'⁴ The advice, 'Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary use words,' is often attributed to him. Likewise he and his community exercised a prophetic role, not so much by noisy denunciation, as by being the change or reform they wished to see.

Such authenticity gives him credibility and authority. What makes him even more attractive is that he doesn't take himself too seriously. He takes his call to do something new seriously, but not himself. He would refer to himself and his brothers as 'Jongleurs de Dieu' ('Troubadours of God') – an unusual metaphor for a band of ascetics, to describe themselves as medieval entertainers, proficient in juggling, acrobatics, music and recitation. I like to think he had a sense of humour.

³ Davis, J. (2015) 'Saint Francis of Assisi', R. Ashby (ed.), *Heroes of the Faith*, Garratt Publishing, Mulgrave.

⁴ Jamie-Arpin Ricci, 'Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary use words', *Huffington Post*, July 1 2012, downloaded <huffpost.com> 8 September 2022.

He would say, 'My brothers, my brothers. God has called me by the way of humility and simplicity ...The Lord told me what he wanted. He wanted me to be a new fool for the world. God did not wish to lead us by any other way than this knowledge.'⁵ There is an echo here of St Paul's words: 'God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise' (1 Cor 1:27).

So what does the fool archetype suggest? According to Christine Valters Painter,⁶

The sacred function of the Fool is to tear down the illusions we hold so dear and to illuminate what is new through playfulness and humour, using shocking or unconventional behaviour to challenge the status quo or social norms. The Fool helps us to see beyond the dualities we live by.

This is a subversive role. At one level this archetype is about living in the moment without guile – at one with ourselves and with the cosmos – about being unselfconsciously who we are and not trying to conceal it under some carefully orchestrated persona designed to impress.

In this respect, the archetype of holy fool can look like naiveté or innocence – and this is how Francis is portrayed in the Zefferelli film – but the reality is more nuanced. We cannot carry the wisdom of that archetype without having undergone some disillusionment. We need to have experienced some of the harsher realities of life, including our own suffering and our capacity to wound and heal others. The holy fool has a capacity for irony and paradoxical wisdom – an important attribute for those of us given to romantic idealism.

There is an obvious link between the holy fool and humility. The awareness provided by our inner fool can help us avoid the extremes of both inflation and self-doubt, of thinking better or worse of ourselves than we are. 'Humility,' says Christine Valters-Painter, 'is a dance between embracing our limits and our giftedness.'⁷

⁵ Richard Rohr's *Daily Meditation*, Oct 8 2020.

⁶ Christine Valters Painter, *Illuminating the Way: Embracing the Wisdom of Monks and Mystics*, Ave Maria Press, 2016.

⁷ Christine Valters-Painter,

For me, one of the best gifts of the holy fool is that it allows us to live in the tragic gap between the ideal and the real, between what we wish we and others could be and what we and they are. It helps us accept what we are without losing sight of the more we can be.

The fool archetype is also about simplicity, as St Francis pointed out. One way to think about simplicity is singlemindedness or wholeheartedness. The simplicity of knowing what really matters, giving ourselves to that and allowing our life to flow from there. Jesus reminded Martha in tonight's reading (Luke 10: 38-42) that the one thing needful was to sit at his feet and listen to what he has to say. I don't see this as a preference for contemplation over action, but as an invitation to integrate our inner Mary and Martha, so that what we do flows from what we most truly are.

In Brother Francis' case, much of his sitting at Jesus' feet happened in nature. He allowed nature to teach him what was important. 'The world is our cloister or monastery,' he would remind his brothers. In this monastery there were no walls between the secular and the sacred, between contemplation and action. For Francis nature was a place of divine encounter and intimate relationship with the cosmos, other creatures, himself and God.

His joy and delight in the natural world is apparent in 'Canticle of the Creatures' (we sing a version of this tonight). Significantly, this joyous hymn of praise for God's creation was written just a year before he died when he was in very poor health and probably blind, and a year after he had received the stigmata while on retreat at Mount Laverna. Francis was not *just* a nature mystic. He lived in solidarity with Christ's suffering and the suffering of the world.

Nor is the canticle *just* a hymn of praise. When he called all creatures, the sun and moon, water, fire, even death, his brothers and sisters, he was expressing his kinship with all things including suffering and death. His motto or mantra, 'Deus Meus et Omnia' (My God and all Things') in a sense answers his earlier question: 'Who are you, O God, and who am I?' It was up to St Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus some decades later to translate into scholastic theology what Francis the mystic had

understood intuitively. And it was Gerard Manley Hopkins, 19th Cent priest and poet, who gave poetic expression to St Francis' unitive and sacramental view of the universe where 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'⁸ and 'Christ plays in ten thousand places,/Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his...'⁹

So what is his legacy for us today? What, if any of all this finds us? I leave you with some prompts in Francis' own words:

Who are you, O God and who am I?

God has called me to be a new fool for the world.

The world is our monastery or cloister.

I have done what is mine to do, now you must do yours.

⁸ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', W.H.Gardener (ed), *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Penguin Books, 1958.

⁹ Op. cit., 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame...'