

Homily. St Francis (1181-1226) 4th October, 2009

Christ Church South Yarra

Lectionary: Gen 1: 20-25; Ps 148: 7-14; Gal 6: 14-18; Mt 11: 25-30.

In the words of St Francis "Pax et bonum" (peace and goodness be with you).

Today is a wonderful day for Ellie and her family and this community. Today, Ellie, at your baptism on your behalf your sponsors and parents are going to be asked by Mother Jenny if you "turn to Christ."

But let's go back to around 800 years ago. European society was emerging into a new era of culture, music, and science, the Middle Ages. At that time in the Italian town of Assisi a young man Francis Bernadoni the son of a wealthy cloth merchant was doing what most young men of privilege were doing- playing games, singing, dancing, drinking, chasing young women and going to war against the neighbouring Italian state. And then, like many young men who go to war, Francis became seriously ill with one of the diseases of battle, perhaps dysentery. In this context, returning as a sick young man to his parents in Assisi, because he had faced death, he asked questions about the purpose of his life. As a consequence of this, Francis did something that was to change the course of his life and has continued to impact on human society. Francis turned to Christ.

As a result of that decision, Francis became the first poet in the Italian language, the language of his community rather than the Latin used by the Church. He was a founder of the movement to protect the environment, God's creation. He was a true democrat. He established a continuing world- wide community, comprising a first order of religious brothers, a second order of religious sisters and a third order of people who continue to live and work in the lay community but who try to live by his principles of simplicity, faithfulness and obedience. He was also recognised in the year after his death as a saint, or one who has faithfully tried to live as Christ did. His teaching was accessible because he taught about Christ and the wonders of God's creation in his native Italian. He spent long periods in meditation and was revered and

visited by many who saw him as a reflection of Christ. This culminated in a mysterious event when he emerged from a period of prayer and fasting with wounds on his hands, feet and side as if he also had been crucified.

I want to reflect on two outcomes of St Francis' commitment to turn to Christ each day of his life. The first was the realisation that God is present in all of creation, as reflected in today's reading from the book of Genesis. The second was that if we give thanks and love God for His presence then we are bound to change our life and behaviour.

When St Francis turned to Christ he was able to see God manifest in all creation. As Jesus said in today's Gospel reading ...if we turn to Him we may by God's grace come to know God for no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. St Francis was able to see the interconnection and dependency of all things with each other. He gave thanks for sister rosella, brother dingo, sister water and brother fire. As a consequence of turning to Christ, St Francis was also able to embrace the unloved and the unlovely, who are all manifestations of God's creation. He could see God's love, care and nurture shining from the eyes of a mother. In the arms of a father holding his child he could see God's strength, support and safekeeping. St Francis concludes one of his poems with the exclamation "Be thou praised my Lord for everything!" This echoes today's psalm. But is this the only consequence of the decision to turn to Christ? It is certainly wonderful to feel warm and fuzzy when we praise God as we observe a magnificent sunset or marvel at the strength of a lion and the majesty of a whale.

Although we wonder at the glory of God's creation, St Francis has taught us by his example that we must also respond to God's love expressed in his creation. St Francis discovered through the grace of God, that when he turned to Christ, he also experienced a call to a new life. He was compelled to act and change direction. As St Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians: "The only thing that counts is a new creation" brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ (New English Bible). In other words, if we turn to Christ we cannot avoid the consequences of the action of the love of God in our life. A response is unavoidable. Love is reciprocal; it does not exist without another. The

expression of love means the development of a relationship. For St Francis this meant that he had to follow a different pathway than that chosen for him by his father and society. Instead of continuing as a cloth merchant he went off to build God's church; initially to literally rebuild the old, ruined chapel on the outskirts of Assisi, San Damiano's.

This was a hard decision. It meant rejecting his father's authority, and giving up all the wealth and position in society that was his birthright. Another consequence for St Francis in turning to Christ and responding to God's love manifest in all creation was, for Francis, the shocking realisation that lepers too were made in God's image. St Francis as did all people in his time, feared and loathed lepers who were outcast and rang a bell to warn all of their presence. In turning to the new creation in Christ, St Francis had no option but to kiss and embrace a leper. This act led to the development of a hospice movement which continues today, to provide care for lepers and other disabled, chronically ill and disturbed people rejected by society.

St Francis lived in the time of the Crusades when forces representing Christianity were in an ongoing war with forces representing Islam mostly focussed on a battle to control Jerusalem. In the equivalent to walking into the mountains of Afghanistan to meet Osama bin Laden, St Francis left the safety of Crusader controlled areas and travelled to talk about peace with the Sultan who led the Muslim army. The Sultan listened respectfully and common ground was found. St Francis left the camp unharmed.

One of the consequences of the behaviour of St Francis in turning to Christ is that he is regarded by some as mad. St Francis would often express his praise and love of God in song and dance in the role of a juggler or jester. St Francis himself admitted that he was "possessed by a holy madness", but what is madness? As a Psychiatrist, I know that this is not the same as mental illness. A person who has a mental illness is not mad, he or she is ill. They have a disorder of the brain and mind which impairs their functioning, causes suffering and demands our acceptance and care just like any other illness such as diabetes which is a disorder of another organ, the pancreas. Madness is a judgemental, pejorative term which means that the person is behaving in a

way that challenges convention and the comfortable order of daily life. For St Francis, leaving the wealth and position in society in his predetermined role as a fabric merchant and crusader knight was seen as madness. Acknowledging that the Muslim Sultan was a creation of God was madness and an act of blasphemy. When we turn to Christ, a consequence of accepting his “new creation” is that we are likely to end up doing things out of the ordinary that might be seen as mad; such as pouring water over an infant on a Sunday morning instead of lying in bed recovering from the onset of daylight saving, or caring for someone, or trying to settle a conflict when we could be leaving that to others who are paid to do it. But St Francis discovered that in taking on the work, the anxiety and the load that is the consequence of a genuine and loving response to the love of Christ for us, he found joy, he found that “in suffering we are healed, in seeking to make peace we will find peace and in loving we will be loved.” He was able to demonstrate to us the absolute reality of Christ’s promise that the consequence of turning to Christ will be that regardless of the work or load that we might have to bear, Christ will bring us relief. In the end, our load will actually be light and as it says in the Gospel, we will truly be able to know Christ and all of God’s creation in heaven which has been made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

At the font Ellie will meet sister water and brother fire and with St Francis we will turn to Christ and say; “Be Thou praised my Lord for everything.” But at the Holy Eucharist be mindful of St Francis’ challenge:

“hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,
so that He who gives himself totally to you may receive you totally.”

(St Francis of Assisi, *Let the Whole of Mankind Tremble*, trans R. J. Armstrong and I. C. Brady).

Prof Bruce Tonge