

St Thomas' of the Air Church
Saint Francis of Assisi
Oct 4, 2020
rmcneely+

For he who is exalted shall be abased
And he who is humbled shall be exalted.

From their pulpits today, priests all over the City are talking about Francis, of Assisi.

Today, Oct 4th, is the day set aside to honor a beloved man named
Francesco di Pietro di Benardone
Whom the world knows simply as Francis

Let me too speak of Francis today.
And let this sermon begin as Francis began his sermons:

“May the Lord give you peace”.

How is it we are still speaking of this man who lived 800 years ago
How is it that he has enduring influence
across 8 centuries
from a life lived 6,000 miles away from this City
that bears his name?

He was born in 1181 to a textile merchant father
and French mother
in Assisi Italy in the Provenca of Perugia.
He would live only 46 years
but with that short life
he would become a Saint
and influence the world for centuries.

His early biographers say that as a boy Francis was dearly loved
Literally everyone loved Francis
He was lighthearted, fun loving, generous, charming
He was always happy, laughed a lot.

A little mischievous in an impish way, frivolous
The kids in Assisi wanted to be Francis' friend.

His early life had all the ease that his father's wealthy business
could provide.

He was given a good education
 although not a brilliant or dedicated student
 He spoke French as well as his native Italian
 He wrote songs and sang them
 as he hiked the hills near his home.

He loved the romance of the tradition of the French Troubadour.

Francis worked in his father's business from a young age
 He wore the latest colorful fashions from France
 That his father imported.
 But wore them to the delight of Assisi
 as part of the fun that he so generously spread to all

Perugia, the region in which Francis lived was the rival of nearby
Siena.

 And there were periodic battles between the two city-states
When he was of age, Francis wanted to fight for his city
 To demonstrate his bravery and courage.
He enthusiastically joined the local militia
 He was captured and held for ransom in a dungeon for a year.

This was the era of the crusades and Francis answered the Fourth
call for knights to war with the muslims.

 His father gave him a horse and a splendid suit of armor and
cape.

 Francis rode out of town to the hurrahs of the people
 But that first night,
 He heard the voice of God in a dream
 Telling him he had it all wrong and calling him back

Francis returned humiliated.

People laughed at his cowardice.

His father raged at him

for wasting the cost of the lavish suit of armor.

He crept off to a cave where he wept for his sins and prayed.

He was about 25 years old and had only 21 years to live.

But God had plans for Francis.

Francis' life did not begin with many indications of what it would become.

But things began to change.

As he was riding through the countryside one day

He came upon a leper

He was horrified by the sight and smell of the man.

But something urged him to approach the man.

He touched him

And kissed his putrid hand

There upwelled in him a sense of overwhelming joy.

As he rode away Francis looked back

The man had vanished.

He was sleeping in the ruins of the church of San Damiano

And from what was left of the crucifix

Francis heard the voice of Christ

Tell him

Francis, rebuild my church

Francis took Him literally and went to his father's store and took fabric and sold it to use for rebuilding the church.

His father had about had it with his son.

With what amounted to theft, the wasting of money and Francis's cowardice, and a seeming disinterest in money,

His father took Francis before the Bishop in front of the town

And demanded that Francis return the money and renounce all rights as heir.

The Bishop instructed Francis to return the money

And to rely upon God to provide

Francis did that

But also took off his clothes that his father had given him and returned them to his father as well.

Francis accepted the renunciation and declared that from then on his Father was to be his Father in heaven.

Francis returned to San Damiano and with stones that he begged from Assisi and the surrounding towns, he rebuilt the church with his bare hands.

But he soon realized that God had given him a wider task

he was meant to do more than restore the physical building.

He was to restore the spirit of the Church of God.

It was a watershed moment for him.

He lived in the open

Subsisted on the alms and food given to him by others.

He wanted direction for his new life

And turned to the Bible

He took it in his hands

And randomly opened it

The Bible fell open to three verses

1. Matt 19:21 If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast and give to the poor.
2. Luke 9: 13 When Jesus sent the Apostles to preach the Gospel, he instructed them: "Take nothing for your journey"
3. Matt 16: 24 If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.

All are the words of Christ.

Francis saw in them the Rule by which he would live his life.
 And he lived all his remaining days
 in strict obedience to the Rule.
 And so began his ascetic life.

Francis took what he had, sold it and gave it to the poor.
 For the rest of his life he owned nothing more than the hair shirt he
 wore as underwear, a tunic and a piece of rope that he wore as a
 belt. Francis did not even own shoes or sandals.

Francis delighted in living the life that Jesus led during his earthly
 ministry.

 You see, Francis literally loved Jesus
 And emulated Him in every way.
 He put on Jesus and thereby became close to Him.
 Recall that Jesus owned only
 the one set of clothes that He wore.

Francis chose to eat very little
 and what he did eat
 was barely enough to sustain life.
 He fasted for long periods during the each year.
 Such was his complete obedience to the Rule of poverty.

Francis knew of the Bible verse from Matthew when Jesus said
 “Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these
 my brethren you have done it unto me”.

Francis reasoned that Jesus was in the poor.
 And that he would try to become as poor as he could
 To be closer to Jesus.

It is what Francis would call Holy Poverty
 And it became his life.

Today we look at his life and lament his poverty.
 But mind you. Francis never saw it that way.

Francis never tried to abolish poverty.
 He tried to make it Holy.
 To him Holy Poverty was a source of great joy.

Few of us are called to an ascetic life.
 But who among us would not benefit from a reduction of
 materialism in our lives.
 For Francis it was liberating
 A way for him to become closer to Our Lord.
 Would we too not enjoy the same?

If any of Francis' friends were standing beside me this morning
 they would speak of Francis' relationship with what many today
 call "nature".

 We know it as God's creation.
 Francis had an uncommon, special relationship with all of creation
 But like most things with Francis
 It was personal
 And it was loving

The birds and the wild animals of the Italian countryside
 Francis knew as brothers and sisters
 He was not being fanciful
 All God's creatures had in them the spirit of God
 And that made Francis who shared that same spirit
 Their brother.

His friends might tell you of the time Francis interceded
 And spoke with a wild wolf
 That had been attacking sheep
 And made arrangements for the wolf to stop eating the sheep
 And the farmers to feed the wolf.

'they would tell you countless stories of Francis
 talking and singing to the birds
 as he strolled the forests

and how the birds sang back to Francis
 almost in the fashion of a conversation
 This was Francis
 He lived his beliefs
 He could care less how outsiders might view him.
 Every aspect of creation was
 Brother rock, sister stream, Brother Sun and Sister Moon
 He saw the spirit of God in all of them.
 And they were all his sisters and brothers.
 Even the diseases that made his sick and even those that took his
 life
 He called brother and sister.
 He even loved them too.
 You see, they brought him closer to Jesus.
 His last diseases in particular
 He loved
 They brought him home to God.

Who among us has not marveled at God's work?
 But who among us actually lived that thought?

The last thing Francis would want you to know about him was his
 humility
 But that would have been one of the first things you would h
 You would have seen in him if you had known him.

For Francis, humility was a given
 I doubt it ever crossed his mind
 That he should act with humility
 Any more than he had conscious thoughts to breathe.

One of his earliest biographers, himself to become a saint
 St Bonaventure. He said of Francis' humility:
 "Humility,
 the guardian and the ornament

of all the virtues
 had filled the man of God (that is what he called Francis) in
 copious abundance.
 In his own estimation
 He was nothing but a sinner,
 Although in truth he was
 A resplendent mirror
 Of all holiness.

Francis recalled the time Jesus answered the Apostles:
 Whoever wishes to become great among you
 Let him be your servant
 And whoever wishes to be first among you
 Will be your slave.

And so Francis sought only to serve.
 If he was going to live the life of Christ
 He would serve
 And serve he did.
 That is the nature of true Christian humility.
 It came hand and glove with Holy Poverty
 To become less is more
 The joy of life came only in serving God.

Francis never set out to establish a religious order
 But men came to him to live the life he was living.
 He sent them out two by two as Jesus had sent the Apostles.

These men in rags preaching about God's love
 Frightened people at first
 These men who owned nothing
 Who lived in the dirt
 And ate the cast off food that was given them
 Weren't they mad? Was it contagious?

But there was something about them. They were happy with nothing.

The brotherhood grew into the thousands
 And Francis knew he had to go to Rome and seek approval if the
 Brothers were to continue preaching
 Pope Innocent III literally threw this little man in rags from the
 Papal Palace.

But that night the Pope had a dream in which Francis
 Was holding up the Lateran basilica.

The Pope's own church and palace.

Innocent III rushed to get Francis back and granted approval of the
 order known as the Friars Minor more popularly known today as
 the Franciscans.

The order grew to over 5,000 men in 10 years.

They live even today under the Order composed by St Francis.

Finally I must speak of Francis' death.
 His asceticism and long fasts began to take its toll.
 Toward the end of his life Francis' eyesight dimmed
 And he had a series of diseases.

One night he fervently prayed to know the suffering that Jesus had
 endured on the cross.

When he awoke

His hands, feet and side bore the wounds of Christ's
 crucifixion.

The wounds are called the "stigmata"

And are always fatal.

Francis was not the first or the last to suffer them.

As he died Francis sang to the diseases that were taking his life.

They were brother disease who was taking him home to God.

And Francis was joyful unto the end.

Surrounded by the brothers and God's love
Francis died on this day, Oct 4th in the year 1226. 794 years ago
today.

Francis makes us rethink what we know of poverty and the poor.

 Holy poverty
What we think about God's creation
 And our duty toward it.

What we think about our own humility and submission to God
And what we know of a life devoted to prayer
 And of our lives dedicated to Christ.

