

St Alban's Advent Course 2023

St Francis of Assisi



Week 1: Humility and Poverty

Week 2: Peace

Week 3: Creation care

Week 4: Incarnation

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Week 1 – HUMILITY AND POVERTY

An introduction to St Francis and this Advent course can be found on our youtube page titled 'Introduction to St Francis':

[▶ Introduction to St Francis](#)



*St. Francis renounces all worldly goods.
A fresco in St. Francis church, Assisi*

A story from the life of Francis - Humility in mistakes

There was a man called Ruffino who was an early follower of St Francis, he was shy, often silent and had a speech impediment. Francis told him to go into Assisi and preach at the cathedral. When he refused, Francis chastised him and ordered him to do it, and to do it naked as

punishment for disobeying. Ruffino went to do so, and people mocked him as he tried (and failed) to speak. Francis was quickly humbled and ashamed of his behaviour, and came himself to Assisi, also naked, as penance for his rash demand. But he also preached, and as it was his gift, many people responded and the gospel was shared. He also made peace with Ruffino and they were reconciled. They both learned a great deal from the demands of obedience and repentance.

Ruffino didn't suddenly become a gifted speaker. Francis failed in his leadership as he made a wrong call. But things still worked out ok, and to the glory of God. Humility is about being true to ourselves, true to the person God made us to be, and also, making mistakes! The call on every Christian is to become more humane – and thus more human, more how we were created to be. If what we follow, what we believe, makes us less humane, less human, then it is not of God. (And to make mistakes is to be human.)

Discussion


- St Francis was sometimes strong willed, and would charge ahead convinced of his own ideas, but he also understood when he got it wrong. How hard do you find it to admit to making mistakes?
 - St Francis repented of his actions in quite an extreme way! On Sundays we have a confession and absolution to help us repent of our mistakes. How do you find the confession and absolution? Are there any practical things you do when you want to repent of a mistake you have made?
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Read Philippians 2:3-11

Discussion

- Our reading talks about humility - what does being a humble Christian mean to you?
- Verse 3 suggests 'valuing others above yourself' is an act of humility. Do you agree? Why/why not?

Listen - Humble king

 HUMBLE KING [Official Lyric Video] | Vineyard Worship fe...

Going Deeper - Poverty

“Of all those who came to join him, Francis demanded that they sell what they possessed and distribute the money to the poor. This requirement was not unprecedented. Most monks, at the time of their profession of faith, had to abandon everything that belonged to them. The difference was that, upon entering a monastery, one became a member of a community that itself possessed buildings, lands, and revenues and materially took into its care those who were joining them. By contrast, Francis and his companions, without any possessions or resources, had to work with their hands and beg bread and turnips in order to assure their subsistence.”¹

Another contributing factor to his commitment to poverty was its relationship with violence; the only way to be a true peacemaker and peace-bringer (more on this next week) was to have no possessions. When a bishop once suggested that the brothers should have some resources to take with them for their missions, Francis replied “If we had possessions, we would then need weapons to defend them”. Instead Francis counselled his followers to see money and coins in the same way they see stones and dirt, and any money they were given was donated straight to the poor and needy.

¹ Vauchez

In Francis's time, as now, money increasingly became the sole aim of life. We can see the devastation caused when this ideology pervades, such as in health, education, environment, democracy, food production, animal welfare, technology and young people's mental health, and so on. And so voluntary poverty was Francis' answer to fighting this approach to life.

For St. Francis, the incarnation was the greatest wonder and the central message of the gospel, and for him, poverty and the incarnation were inextricably linked. Because for God to relinquish all his power, his glory, his majesty, in order to be born into the human condition, and not only so, but to suffer and die such an agonising death, was the ultimate experience of poverty. And so St. Francis chose for himself and his followers to be poor as well, in order to relate more closely to the person of Jesus, who impoverished himself for us, in that He gave up everything for us.



Key word: Incarnation

The word "incarnation" is derived from the Latin "incarnatio," which means "to become flesh." The Incarnation teaches that, in the person of Jesus Christ, the divine and human natures are united in a single, unique, and indivisible way. This concept is foundational to Christian beliefs about the nature and identity of Jesus, emphasising that God entered into human history, lived as a human, and experienced human existence while retaining His divine nature.

Discussion

- St Francis wanted to be poor in order to be like Jesus. What are some other ways that Christians can choose to imitate Jesus?
- St. Francis saw poverty as strongly related to the Incarnation. What are some other words that can help describe the incarnation? How would you describe the Incarnation?
- Being poor doesn't magically make us holy; those of us who are poor can still be greedy, selfish, unkind. What do people, like St. Francis, who actively choose poverty want to achieve or understand?
- Can Franciscan spirituality have a practical and helpful application to the way we view wealth and money?
- What are classic stereotypes we make about poor people, middle class people, and rich people?
- Often we think that we should "give to the poor". Instead, what ways can we receive from poor people, and learn from them? What activities might bring us into more contact with 'the poor'?

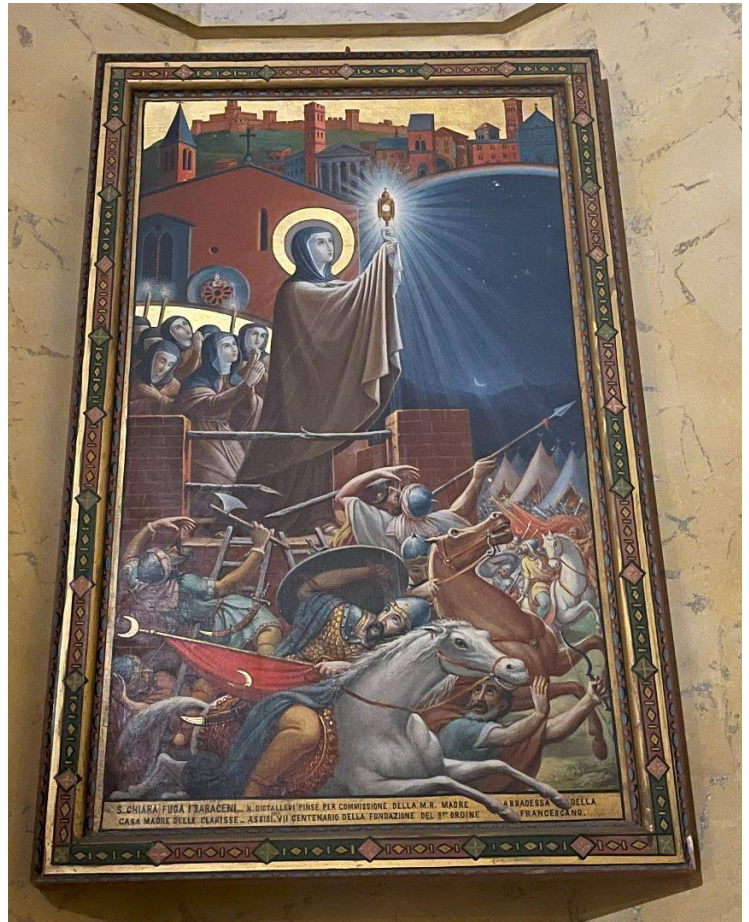
Closing prayer

Help us, most loving God, to treasure the poor people in our midst, to share our goods, and to receive the gifts that poor people offer us. Help us not to be angry or resentful toward them. Help us to know that we are, indeed, one of them before you. Amen.

Week 2 – St. Francis and St. Clare - PEACE

Clare was the daughter of a wealthy Count and lived in a palace in Assisi. On hearing St Francis preach during Lent, she knew that she wanted to commit her whole life to serving Christ.

Francis did not receive Clare begrudgingly, but welcomed her with open arms, and himself conferred on her the same plain habit worn by the brothers. He was the one who engineered her 'escape' from her palace, and sent brothers



The miracle of St. Clare driving back attacking Saracens with the Eucharist. Depicted in St. Clare's church, Assisi

to fetch and guide her in the dead of night to himself. When Francis was dying his final wish was to be taken to San Damiano to see Clare again and she brought him great comfort and peace. He often turned to her for advice, and in the early years before she lived a cloistered life, she travelled with him. His nickname for her was 'cristiana' – "The Christian" – and he clearly had great respect and admiration for her life.

It is said of Clare that she reflected peace through all that she said and did in her community at San Damiano. On her deathbed she said to herself: "Go forth in peace, for you have followed the good road. Go forth without fear, for He Who

created you has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you as a mother. Blessed be You, my God, for having created me.”

Discussion

- Are there people in your life who you would describe as a person of peace? What are they like?
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Read John 20:19-23

Discussion

- Is there a link between peace and forgiveness?
- We ‘share the peace’ during our church service, what does this part of the service mean to you?

Listen - Make me a channel of your peace - a song based on a prayer written by St Francis

 [Make Me A Channel Of Your Peace](#)

Going Deeper - Peace

“St.Francis taught his companions to use the greeting: The Lord give you peace! When you proclaim peace by your words, he told them, you must carry an even greater peace in your hearts. Let no-one be provoked to anger by you, or be scandalised, but let your gentleness encourage all men to peace, good will and mutual love. For our calling is to heal the wounded, to tend the maimed and to bring home those who have lost their way. For

many today seem to us children of the Devil will yet become disciples of Christ.”²

“To an urban society torn apart by violence, the Poor Man of Assisi and his companions were proposing what society most desperately needed: peace. Possessing no goods and being subject to all, the friars could have no quarrel with the people and essentially became ‘paciaires’ – real peacemakers. Moreover, within the fraternity of the brothers, men who belonged to different social classes peacefully coexisted; people who, in the world, would have been antagonistic to one another.”³

There were multiple public and local political conflicts that Francis personally intervened in and acted as mediator in order to facilitate reconciliation.

Peace was an active word for St. Francis, not passive. It meant doing something about a situation. That is why he preached in the streets; to reconcile people to their saviour. It is why he travelled to the Crusades, trying to establish peace. It is why he invited civic authorities of neighbouring cities to be reconciled with one another. It is why he saved animals from violence and destruction.

Discussion

- St Francis had a radical approach to peace: sell everything! This is a powerful image to us and society. Is there anyone you can think of today who symbolises peace in a thought provoking way?

² Clissold

³ Vauchez

- What actions can we take to be people of peace in our family, friends, church, and community?
- If Francis were alive now, where (locally, nationally, and internationally) would he see a need for peace? Which groups of people would he be seeking to bring together?
- Why is it difficult to be a peacemaker?
- What does inner peace mean to you? What helps you feel peaceful?

Closing prayer - Make me an instrument of your peace by St Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
 Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
 Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.
 Where there is discord, let me bring union.
 Where there is error, let me bring truth.
 Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
 Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
 Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
 Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.

O Master, let me not seek as much
 to be consoled as to console,
 to be understood as to understand,
 to be loved as to love,
 for it is in giving that one receives,
 it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
 it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
 it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life. Amen.

Week 3 – St.Francis and the animals - CREATION CARE



*St.Francis' sermon to the birds.
A fresco in St.Francis church,
Assisi.*

Story from St.Francis' life: The sermon to the birds⁴

Francis is struggling with a deep personal dilemma: Should he retire from the world and devote himself entirely to prayer, or should he continue travelling about as a preacher of the gospel?

To answer this question, St. Francis sends brothers to seek the advice of two of his most trusted colleagues: Brother Sylvester and St Clare.

The word comes back very quickly from both Sylvester and Clare that it is their clear judgement that God wants Francis to keep proclaiming the good news of God's saving love.

No sooner does Francis hear their response than he immediately stands up, and "without the slightest delay he takes to the roads, to carry out the divine command with great fervour."

Here we would imagine Francis as rushing off to the nearest village or marketplace to begin preaching the gospel to the people gathered there. But where does Francis actually go? Francis' very next stop is this: "He came to a spot where a large flock of birds of various kinds had come together. When God's

⁴ Wintz

saint saw them, he quickly ran to the spot and greeted them as if they were endowed with reason....

“He went right up to them and solicitously urged them to listen to the word of God, saying, ‘Oh birds, my brothers and sisters, you have a great obligation to praise your Creator, who clothed you in feathers and gave you wings to fly with, provided you with pure air and cares for you without any worry on your part.’...The birds showed their joy in a remarkable fashion: They began to stretch their necks, extend their wings, open their beaks and gaze at him attentively.

“He went through their midst with amazing fervour of spirit, brushing against them with his tunic. Yet none of them moved from the spot until the man of God made the sign of the cross and gave them permission to leave; then they all flew away together.

Discussion

- If Francis preached a sermon directly to you, like he did to the birds, which aspects of your life, your skills - your uniquely created being that make you *YOU* - would he encourage you to use, to praise and worship God?

Read Psalm 148

Discussion

- Our reading describes animals, plants, astronomy and even the weather praising God. Do we perhaps have a limited idea of what praising God actually involves or looks like?
- During our church services we bring up our gifts of bread and wine representing both the gifts of creation and the work of human hands, and praying that it will become for us the bread of life and cup of salvation. What do these parts of the service mean to you?

Listen - Brother Sun (Giving Glory) by The Porter's Gate
(based on a poem by St Francis)

 The Porter's Gate ft. Liz Vice // Brother Sun (Giving Glory) ...

Going Deeper

“He called all creatures *brother*, and in a most extraordinary manner, a manner never experienced by others, he discerned the hidden things of nature with his sensitive heart...”⁵

“Francis calls the birds ‘noble’...It underlines Francis’s increased respect for his fellow creatures. Each creature has its special worth, its special character of which it should be proud.”⁶

⁵ Celano

⁶ Sorrell

“Prayer for Francis was always a journey of growing more deeply in relationship with God and neighbour, including his non-human neighbours in the great family of creation.”⁷

Bonaventure, an intelligent Christian theologian who took over the running of the Franciscans after St Francis died, laid out a three stage process of prayerful Franciscan meditation, and described the first stage thus:

“Meditation on nature. As human beings express themselves in language, so God expresses himself through creation. His creatures are signs or symbols of him, his shadows or vestiges. Nature is to be studied not for its own sake but to lead us to God.”

Francis had a keen sense that all creatures—not just humans—must be included in the celebration of Christmas. Francis’ biographers tell us that he wanted the emperor to ask all citizens to scatter grain along the roads on Christmas Day so that the birds and other animals would have plenty to eat. Walls, too, should be rubbed with food, Francis said, and the beasts in the stable should receive a bounteous meal on Christmas Day. He believed that all creatures had a right to participate in the celebration of Christmas.⁸

⁷ Horan

⁸ Wintz

Discussion

- Close your eyes. Picture one of your favourite places in nature. Where is it? Describe it.
- In what ways do you see aspects of God in nature?
- Is it easier to love animals or to love people? Why or why not?
- How can we celebrate God's creation in church and at home this Christmas?

Closing prayer

God our creator and redeemer, your world manifests your wisdom, beauty and love, but we have disfigured it in ignorance, ugliness, and violence; Have mercy upon us, Lord, and grant us a new awareness of our relatedness with the earth and with all living beings; Give us the compassion of Jesus and the energy of the Holy Spirit, that the world may be renewed; To the glory of your dear name. Amen.

Week 4 – The INCARNATION OF CHRIST

Story from St.Francis' life: The crib at Greccio⁹

Christmas of 1223 was drawing near and the pipers were already playing their rustic pastoral tunes. Ever since his visit to Bethlehem, Francis' tender love for the Child Jesus was increasing, and now he had a bright idea. Summoning John Velita, the lord of Greccio, he told him his plan: 'If you would like us to celebrate Christmas at



A crib scene featuring St.Francis, at St.Mary of the angels church, Assisi

Greccio, go there and prepare the things I tell you. I would like to portray the Babe born in Bethlehem, and to see with my own bodily eyes all the discomforts he suffered because he lacked the things a new born babe should have;and how he was placed in a manger, lying on straw, between an ox and an ass. So go look around in the woods among the rocks for a suitable grotto. Bring in a manger, some straw, an ox and an ass. And with the friars and people, we shall celebrate the coming of the Son of God upon earth.'

Preparations for that Holy Night were made with great enthusiasm. The friars came even from distant hermitages with

⁹ Valentino Turetta, *Saint Francis of Assisi*

lighted candles and encircled the grotto, and were joined by the local people.

At the midnight Mass Francis took the part of deacon and sang the Gospel of the Nativity. Then he preached a stirring sermon on the meaning of Our Savior's Birth, sweetly calling Him the "Babe of Bethlehem".

That night became radiant with light as songs of joyous praise resounded through the woods and mountains, and the hearts and souls of men, women and children were transformed, as they began to see with their own eyes and experience the reality of God's love for them when He first came down to earth as a little child.

In the manger near the altar lay a wooden statue of the Christ Child. When Francis took it tenderly in his arms, it seemed to stir into life and smile. And no wonder, for through the humble Francis, Christ was reborn in the hearts of men. He popularised the Crib that brings so much joy to both young and old.

It was Francis who thrilled the Catholic world with his simple and fervent celebration. After his death in 1226, the custom of having the crib at Christmas spread widely through Europe.

Discussion


- We continue the tradition that Francis started 800 years ago, and have a crib scene under the Altar and in our homes. What does the crib scene mean to you?

Read Luke 2:4-7

Discussion

- Francis made use of the crib scene as a new way of telling the story of Christmas. What was the most memorable Christmas service you've attended, and what made it memorable?

Listen: Immanuel - Stuart Townend (sung by Jonathan Priday)

 Immanuel (From the squalor of a borrowed stable)

Going Deeper

As we saw in week 1, poverty is so central to St. Francis' faith and spirituality because he sees the incarnation of Christ as a similar act, an act of self-emptying, especially in light of the crucifixion as well.

“Francis wrote that the friars are to recall the ‘self-emptying’ action of God in the celebration of the Eucharist, which should serve yet again as a model for Franciscan life and prayer. He writes: *‘What wonderful majesty! What stupendous condescension! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! That the Lord of the whole universe, God and the Son of God, should humble himself like this and hide under the form of a little piece of bread, for our salvation. Look at God’s condescension my brothers, and pour out your hearts before him. Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by him. Keep back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that he who has given himself wholly to you may receive you wholly.’*¹⁰

¹⁰ Francis of Assisi, A letter to the entire order; in Horan 2021, pg19

St. Clare's spirituality, her wholehearted embrace of poverty, and her focus of contemplation, always centred on the "Why?" of the incarnation. Why did God empty himself and take the nature of a servant? For Clare, it is for this reason: God surrenders his divinity, in order to draw as close as possible, in relationship, to his creation. It is about love, and a relationship that God has initiated, to which we simply need to turn and respond, for he is already there, waiting for us. Prayerful contemplation is about being grasped by the power of God's love, and surrendering to that love, that divine embrace. "Clare describes her experience of prayer and relationship to Christ as an encounter with the God who pursues her."

Discussion

- Poverty in the birth of Christ was a big deal to Francis, is this something we might have lost today with our culture's focus on presents? What are the positives to giving presents? How do we get the balance right?
- Francis was keen not to avoid the difficulties and struggles in the first nativity. Are there parts of Advent and Christmas that you find difficult?
- What part of Advent and Christmas do you find the most special, or in St Clare's words which part makes you feel closest to God?
- What have you learnt about the spirituality of St. Francis and St. Clare? What do you find appealing in their spiritualities? To which of these spiritualities do you most naturally relate?

Closing prayer - a prayer of St. Clare

Oh most high and heavenly Father, giver of life and Father of mercies, we give you thanks for all your gifts, and in a special way for the gift of our vocation, because by means of the words and the example of our blessed Father Francis, your Son became our Way. You who by your mercy and grace called us to follow in His footsteps, make us, like Saint Francis, the friends and imitators of Christ, so that we may render many times over the gifts we have received, and become the mirror of Christ for all our brothers. Amen.

Images from Zoe & Barney's Sabbatical trip to Assisi.

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