

Francis of Assisi, October 7, 2012 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Francis of Assisi – we know all about him....we think! His statue is out in the columbarium surrounded by – and holding – a variety of animals. He loved animals. The coyote’s a reminder of the story of Francis and the Wolf, the birds a reminder of his sermon to them, the rabbit and the doe representing the rest of the animal kingdom. We know he loved animals. And the great joy that is Francis reminds us of the great joy that lives in the animals that surround us.

The danger is that we stop there. That we see Francis only as a great person where loving animals is concerned – because that certainly wasn’t the Francis that his contemporaries knew. We know more of St. Francis than of any other medieval saint. We have we his own words, his Rule, Testament, letters, poems, and liturgical writings, and also the intimate accounts of several of his disciples, written down within twenty years after his death.

Like many great leaders he experienced significant trauma in his life – when, as a young man – he went off (happily, apparently) to fight in a war against another Italian city-state. Ending up on the losing side he was held captive for ransom for over a year. When he returned he was a different person.

He was a different person who – while standing in the ruins of an abandoned chapel – he heard a voice come from the cross hanging above his head, which said “rebuild my church.”

For the rest of his life, that’s what Francis worked to do. And he did so with a remarkable simplicity and grace of spirit, a transparent dedication to others, an understanding of creation that puts him in an entirely different category than other great people. And a joy of life and living that was amazing! He celebrated life – his own, and all creation. He did it by words and actions, he did it by singing - he sang all the time - in fact as he lay dying he was singing! Over the objections of one of the more pious members of his order who was concerned that Francis’ “lack of restraint at so grave an hour might embarrass the order.” Francis replied, "Please excuse me, Brother, but I feel so much joy in my heart that I really can't help myself. I must sing!"

There are several hymns in the hymnal that are based on Francis’ writings – they reflect this joy in creation – one, in particular (406/7) is best known as “Canticle of Creation” – in it Francis speaks about *all of creation as sacred and animated with the presence of God - the moon and sun are not objects in the sky but are subjects in God’s family: brother son, and sister moon.*

We understand that as religious language, but contemporary astrophysics echoes this vision of the relatedness of all creation – though it uses different language. But it’s familiar language: “The Big Bang”. If everything in the universe was created out of that first ‘big bang’ then everything is, in a profound sense, related. The gas clouds that spun for billions, coalesced into cosmic dust, solidified, and eventually formed stars and planets mean that we and all creation are stardust, and to stardust we will return.

Contemporary theology has another name for the Big Bang: the “Primordial Flaring Forth”, and it takes the neutral language of astrophysics and interprets it from the perspective of meaning:

“The Universe” (as Thomas Berry has said), is “not a collection of objects.” The Universe “is a communion of subjects.”

Francis wouldn't have known anything about astrophysics but he would totally have gotten the language of a “communion of subjects”, because that's how he viewed creation: as interdependent. Interdependent and of enormous value – of everything and everyone - every creature, animal, bird, human, tree, plant, rock - everything, in the sight of God.

This is a constant theme down the ages from the earliest Christians to the present day. Francis is just the best known of a long line of Christian mystics who have seen and continue to see the presence of God in all of creation and so understand all creation to be holy.

We can see this “theology of respect” most obviously in the way that he treated animals – which is another way of saying that what we remember about Francis we remember because it's the place where we are most touched personally and emotionally – by the living creatures we share this planet with, and, most closely, we share our homes with: that's the point of connection.

Our animal companions are, in other words, living and breathing and moving metaphors for us – they convey the sacredness of creation – and they remind us of the hallowed and sacred way we're called to respect and treasure the entire Created Order – all creation – in the same way we respect and treasure them.

This is a starting place for us. But it's only a starting place. What about the rest of creation? If all creation is sacred, what should our attitude to that creation be? Certainly such a view demands we treat creation with respect and be responsible stewards when we interface with it.

And not a moment too soon! As theologian Thomas Berry has said elsewhere: We are living in a time of “cosmological and historical urgency” that calls forth a response “from the entire [human] community.”

An objective scientific explanation of creation is accurate but insufficient because it lacks the a moral imperative. When we objectify something we use, we consume it, and we don't see any connectedness or relationship with it. Down that abusive path lies exploitation and death – we can no longer endure the continuing damage that a solely objective understanding of our planet has imposed on us.

If, indeed, creation is “not a collection of objects” but “a communion of subjects”, a gift from God, imbued with the Spirit of God, then to treat it any other way than as sacred is to deny the faith that is in us. We are called, rather to protect creation and use it wisely, carefully, and with respect as we would any gift of such grandeur.

That, certainly, is what Francis believed. He is not alone.

May we sing with him in praise of creation and of God! And the people said Amen.