

Sermon for St. Francis Feast Day 2019

St Francis of Assisi the 13th century Italian saint is not just the most popular Christian saint but the most popular saint throughout the world because of his compassion and kindness to creation and all human beings. He was an incarnational saint but not the way most of us think of incarnation as the Plan B to save the world when the Garden of Eden and subsequent history didn't work out so well. His idea of Incarnation was that it was God's first plan and preceded creation. In the words of his biographer, St. Bonaventure; To Francis the incarnation meant that God in the person of Jesus was the lynchpin between heaven and earth. He shares existence with the stone, with the plants life, with the animals sensation, and with the angels he shares intelligence. Thus all things are transformed in Christ. In the fullness of his nature he embraces some part of every creature. Francis honored this belief by living a nonviolent and humble, simple but liberated lifestyle; by a happy identification with the poor and by his own happiness itself. He understood that happy and humble people change people, much more than sermons or theology ever will. And he and his Franciscans strove to be those humble, happy people that could bring spiritual joy to all those around them, especially those who lived on the outside of society like lepers and the poor.

One night Francis had a dream about a black hen, who had so many chicks that she couldn't protect them all under her wings. He interpreted this to mean that he was the hen and the chicks were his disciples. The point being that since he himself could not protect them all, he needed to rely on God's help. This dream certainly was prophetic not only in terms of his life with his fellow Franciscans but also for the millions of his followers in the world through the centuries yet to come. How could one man live to care for millions of followers? Certainly not without God's providence.

His most powerful statement about his belief in the wider incarnational world happened during the Fifth Crusade during the 13th century when he met with Sultan Malik al Kamil in Egypt, the enemy of the Christian Church. He was equated with the anti-Christ, while Europe was trying to conquer the Holy Land for Christians. Francis went to Egypt three times principally to warn the Christians of the inevitable failure of the crusade and that their patriotism meant disloyalty to the kingdom of God, which includes everyone not just Christians. Before warning the soldiers, he wrote: "If I tell them, they will consider me a fool, if I am silent, I cannot escape my conscience." The soldiers did not take kindly to Francis's words because they knew as did Francis, the Crusades were justified by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, (the Founder of Western Monasticism) by several popes, and the Crusader flag which carried the motto "God Wills It". The revolutionary Francis replied that this war is NOT "the will of the Lord but is disloyal

to the kingdom of God". During the 13th century there was as little known about Islam as there is today except for scary archetypes. Nonetheless Francis went to meet with the Sultan. His humility and respect for the Sultan and his religion earned him a long visit of three weeks. The Sultan sent him away with protection and a gift (a horn that sounded the Islamic call to prayer and is still preserved in Assisi. This is surely a sign that they had given and received mutual regard and respect. There is no known precedent for this kind of behavior in the Medieval period but it left such a lasting negative impact that St Bonaventure, had to "soft pedal" the incident to pacify the popes and secular authorities in Francis's biography. As Francis left the Sultan he stopped to bless the Christian soldiers, who pumped up on political and religious manipulation had rejected his warning. He then grieved for their deaths so soon to come.

Upon returning home, Francis made it clear to his friars in his most primitive Rule. Being among "the Saracens" is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake and be content to confess that they themselves are Christians. Today we call this the "ministry of the "presence". Francis learned something from the Sultan. You remember the famous quote of Francis, "always preach the Gospel but use words only when necessary"? This is the Islamic practice of "in shallah". There, you see that God can work on both sides of the aisle when we cooperate and try to love our neighbor, even if he is a foreigner!

What Francis gained was credibility. In 1217 St Francis was allowed to establish a Franciscan Province, called the Custody of the Holy Land. Its mission was to guard the grace of the Holy Places and the rest of the Middle East, sanctified by the presence of Jesus as well as pilgrims visiting them. Note that Francis cared not just for Christian Pilgrims and Jerusalem but the entire Middle East as well. Francis's love of the world certainly triumphed over Crusading belligerence.

Most of us are pretty good at loving our neighbors but not so good at loving strangers or foreigners. Apparently God is aware of this and so reminds us in the Hebrew Bible to love the stranger at least 36 times and to love our neighbor only once!. Why should we love the stranger? Because God does and we have been strangers ourselves, that is unless we have never left home.

Can we become Christians who love the whole world including foreigners like Francis and Jesus did? Absolutely! Just by trusting that the God who made others different from us is revealed in them as well as ourselves and daring to treat everyone we meet with kindness and humility. As Rabbi Sacks, the Chief Rabbi in Great Britain says; "the supreme religious challenge is to see God, who is not in our image, for only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror to the God we did not make up". And only if we are able to distinguish God's image from our own will we be able to take on the social illnesses of our own time and not be destroyed by cynicism.

Blessings to you all on this feast day of St Francis of Assisi.

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