

October 6, 2013. The Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Last Wednesday, at our weekly healing service, we remembered Bishop George Bell, an English Anglican bishop whose name most of you will not recognize. George Bell was a major voice in the Church of England during WWII and a major ecumenical voice after it. He began his ordained ministry serving the inner city in the industrial city of Leeds among the poor and disenfranchised, an experience that would shape the remainder of his ministry. A remarkable man with a humble, honest heart he became Bishop of English diocese of Chichester in 1929. During the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, he took an active role in securing safe haven in England for Jews and non-Aryans who wanted to escape the terror of the Nazis. He developed a close association with German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in Germany, signing the Barmen Declaration, the manifesto of the Confessing Church that stood in opposition to Hitler's regime. He would almost certainly have been appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1944 if not for His outspoken condemnation of the indiscriminate bombing of German cities during the war, continually "speaking truth to power", reminding British leaders that German civilians were also children of God deserving of compassionate treatment. Following the war Bell was a staunch critic of the cold war and the nuclear arms race, and a remarkable ecumenist. He was a tireless advocate for the cause of unity and a founder of the World Council of Churches, where he met and became a personal friend of the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, Giovanni Montini, who was to become Pope Paul VI.

When I started my preparations for this day, after that service remembering George Bell, I found myself thinking how easy it is to focus on Francis of Assisi quite simply because he was such a remarkable human being and Christian. After his own personal crisis in war caused him to reassess the way he lived, his life became the stuff of legends – except that in his case they were all true! Preaching to the birds as an example of his love of and desire to protect, creation; living in abject poverty such that even members of his own order rejected him as too austere; seeing his entire life as a witness to God such that he probably went to an early grave because he worked so tirelessly on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged; and speaking out fearlessly and loudly against the injustices he saw in the world of his time and the Church of his time!

And yet Francis would probably be a little ticked-off with us if all we do is remember what a wonderful human being he was!

George Bell's story reminded me of that important truth. Here was another quite remarkable human being who was living for others: for those suffering under the yoke of poverty AND of war, a person of deep compassion who saw clearly another way of living and sought to proclaim it the only way he knew how: with integrity and with love.

And both of them would, I believe say the same thing to us: "It's not about me, it's about God".

As much as we admire and respect individual Christians for all the right reasons we also need to hold in front of us the simple, important truth that we should see them as windows into the heart of God, icons of responsible faith, and then ask ourselves how we might live in ways that mirror their devotion and faith.

Today's readings mirror some of the characteristics of both the men I've mentioned:

- Jeremiah - a century after the 8th Century Prophets but surely the theological kin to them – cries out against the injustice of those the wealthy who exploit the poor;
- Paul, writing to the community in Galatia, speaks of the controlling influence of Jesus self-sacrifice, and how this self-sacrifice has helped usher in a new creation predicated not on wealth or power, not on gender or affiliation, but on the humility that comes from recognizing what God has done and is willing to do for us;
- And Jesus – as reported by Matthew – speaks of the compassion of God that bears the sorts of burdens for us that we cannot bear ourselves.

Each of these characteristics: a commitment to justice on behalf of the poor and exploited and a willingness to act and speak for them; and a recognition of the companionate, amazing grace of God that is willing to bear our burdens combined with a deep humility – each of these characteristics are ones we can all admire, even if we struggle to mirror them.

The binding vision, though – the thing that brings these two wonderful human beings and three readings together – is of a creation that is a gift from God – human beings, animals, rocks, hills, oceans – and that this creation is fundamentally good. We therefore have a divine mandate to care for, nurture, and protect it from the ravages of evil that humanity can so easily perpetrate on it.

That's not an easy thing to do! It will undoubtedly bring us into conflict with those vested interests in our world who have absolutely no desire to care for, nurture, or protect if it contradicts or threatens their financial or social standing, or their power. Self-interest is, alas one of the primary human vices, and we aren't immune from it ourselves.

What I hear in people like Francis of Assisi, though, counters that self-interest. As we encounter God in our broader world – in generalities – that encounter draws us into encountering God in particulars also: in the beauty of the butterfly and the spider's web, of the verdant forest and the snow-topped mountain, of the singing bird and howling wolf, the warm sunlight and the gentle rain, every living thing, small and large, every person, every community.

And the opposite is also true: the individual encounters invite reflection on a larger scale – the joy, wholeness, compassion, love, beauty we encounter in the specific draws us to see and seek those joys, that wholeness, that love, that compassion, that beauty in “big picture” terms – what Eucharistic Prayer C describes, “the vast expanse of interstellar space; galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home”.

Recognizing and embracing these moments of encounter, these “thin places” where the divide between earth and heaven is narrowed, and becomes like a thin veil....recognizing and embracing these moments cannot but change the way we look at everything – and I mean everything!

That's certainly what Francis was all about – the transformation of the world by the transformation of the self and then the community.

So certainly celebrate this day and this person by celebrating animals and seeking that they may be blessed! But remember in that moment that Francis was about more than this, about fighting for justice where he saw none, no matter the sacrifice; about proclaiming God's justice, forgiveness and love in every way he could – by action AND by word; and about seeking to bear the burdens of those unable to do so for themselves.

If we truly want to honor Francis – and God – than we can't go far wrong in seeking to emulate him, even if that emulation is a pale copy of the original!