

## **Sermon St Francis of Assisi 4 Oct 20 (Luke 12: 22-34)**

**Kathryn Waite**

Today, as we celebrate harvest it is very apt that in the church calendar, we remember St Francis of Assisi, a saint that I'm sure many of you will have heard of. Chances are you will have heard about how he loved birds and animals, how he talked to them, and you might have seen a statue rather like this one. Many stories were written about Francis' love for God's creatures such as the time that he was out preaching, and a flight of swallows was twittering so loudly that he was struggling to make himself heard. So, Francis addressed the birds directly asking them to be quiet so that he could speak, and immediately they fell silent and remained quiet for the duration of his sermon. Many of the stories about Francis were written by Francis' friends and followers rather than by Francis himself but it is clear that he did love nature.

But there is much more to St Francis than just his love of nature. Francesco Bernadone was born in Assisi in 1181 the son of a rich merchant. (Picture of Assisi and where he was born). He had a comfortable childhood not wanting for anything and his family expected him to continue in the family business. But a number of things happened to him – after having been imprisoned for a year following a local skirmish, he went off to become a knight but having only travelled for one day out of Assisi, he heard God's voice telling him to return. A few days after this, whilst out in Assisi partying with his friends, he was struck dumb, unable to say anything. His life changed, he became more prayerful and he helped others. One day he encountered a beggar, someone who he previously would have gone out of his way to avoid, because of the smell coming from the sores on the man's skin, but suddenly, having pity on the man, he kissed his hand. But it was another encounter with God in the little church of San Damiano, a little way outside of Assisi that changed his life for good. There, as he sat in front of the crucifix, he heard a voice coming from the cross telling him to rebuild the house, which he took to mean that he should rebuild the church. This he did and other local churches too. Before long, a number of others, inspired by Francis' life of simplicity and prayer began to follow him leading to the Order of Friars being founded, with the brothers going out to the surrounding towns and villages, preaching, teaching and looking after the poor and lepers.

Francis' life was centred on Jesus' and Jesus' teachings. He took literally the imperative not to take anything on a journey. And Jesus' words in today's gospel reading about not to worry about tomorrow, about food or clothes were at the heart of what Francis tried to live out and encouraged those about him to do. Francis only had one set of clothes, he did not have any possessions and he begged for food to live on.

Francis spent hours in prayer and attended communion when ever he was able to. This was an opportunity for him, as it is for all of us, whether we are at home or in church, to encounter Christ in

bread (and wine). At Communion we are reminded of God's humility, how God reached down to the world through the gift of Jesus, who lived, went about among us, and died for us. Attending the Eucharist and receiving communion fostered in Francis a sense of humility which also influenced the way he viewed nature. Francis believed that since everything, humans, creatures and the elements have been created by God they should be considered as equals. Humans are not superior creatures but should love and care for creation. Now whether the stories about Francis' interactions with animals and birds are true, his love for nature is seen in his *Canticle to Brother Sun*. The last hymn, which we have heard sung by the choir, or you have sung at home, is based on this song which praises God for the whole created order, for Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water and Brother Fire.

Francis' love for creation and his teaching that the earth's resources should be used according to need, and not exploited, are just as applicable today as they were 800 years ago. In fact, his teaching sounds incredibly modern resonating with the calls of Greta Thunberg and extinction rebellion among others. Indeed, Pope Francis who took the name of the saint as his papal name, used the Umbrian words from Francis' *Canticle to Brother Sun, Laudato Si*, as the title to his encyclical on the care of our common home. In this document he laments the destruction of the environment, the loss of biodiversity and global warming, and calls for dialogue and a greater awareness that humanity does not have dominion over the earth. Pope Francis also calls for a need to rediscover something of the joy, wonder and thankfulness for creation that Francis displayed, something which many of us did rediscover to some extent in lockdown, as we went out for our daily exercise and which we need to hold on to.

We may not be called to give up *all* our possessions like St Francis and beg for food, but we can follow Francis' example and live more simply, being content with what we have, not wanting more all the time, not to 'worry about tomorrow' which I think includes not hoarding pasta and toilet rolls just in case we go back into lockdown.

So as well as being thankful and enjoying creation, and living more simply, we also need to care for our world in whatever ways we are able to, using the gifts, talents, and resources that we each have – using less plastic, recycling what we can, choosing greener energy sources, and using our cars less.

So, this harvest as we remember St Francis – let's move beyond the sentimental view of him and instead be inspired by his life and teaching to enjoy God's creation, to be thankful for it and to take greater care of it.