

The Church's prayer for this Sunday – The seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

O God,
you ever delight to reveal yourself
to the childlike and lowly of heart:
grant that, following the example of the blessed Francis,
we may count the wisdom of this world as foolishness
and know only Jesus Christ and him crucified,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 4th October 2020, the seventeenth Sunday after Trinity - The Feast of St Francis of Assisi

Psalm 100: 1-3

All Lands Summoned to Praise God

A Psalm of thanksgiving.

¹Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

²Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is
now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

Today's reading from the Old Testament: Micah 6: 6-8

What God Requires

⁶With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Luke 12: 22-34

Do Not Worry

²² He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴ Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? ²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰ For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

³² "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection for the seventeenth Sunday after Trinity from the Venerable Alex Hughes, Archdeacon of Cambridge

Today is the Feast of St Francis of Assisi. Nowadays, Francis is probably best known for the prayer, "Make me a channel of your peace" (which he almost certainly didn't write). He is also the patron saint of animals and the environment, which is obviously quite topical these days.

Francis was born at the end of the 12th century in Assisi, central Italy. His father was a wealthy merchant and Francis enjoyed a privileged upbringing. He became a soldier, but was captured and then fell ill; and over the next few years he began to re-evaluate his life and withdrew from his carefree ways until one day he had a vision of Christ in the ruined church of San Damiano, just outside Assisi, which set him on the path to founding the Franciscan religious order, which practices poverty, simplicity, solidarity with the poor and a concern for social justice. The Franciscan Order is part of the Roman Catholic Church, but there are Anglican Franciscans too, with quite a strong Third Order of lay people who try to live the way of St Francis without belonging to a religious community. There may even be some among us this morning.

So that's a bit of background to St Francis and the Franciscans. But what motivated Francis was not, of course, his own reputation. He was inspired by the life of Jesus, whose example he tried to follow. I am sure that he would have treasured today's Gospel reading, which brings together a reverence for the natural world and a commitment to a simple life, free of the burden of possessions.

There are many ways in which St Francis is important for us today, as we struggle with our culture of consumerism and the growing environmental crisis. But what strikes me in particular this morning, is the way in which he illustrates the crucial last verse of our Gospel reading: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Notice what Jesus does not say: he does not say, "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be". We commonly believe that people follow their hearts; but this is largely an illusion. We might think that our heart's desire is something that we generate from somewhere deep inside us. But if that were true, the whole of the advertising industry would be a completely pointless exercise. What the advertisers know is that our hearts are very easily manipulated. If we can be persuaded that something – some product or lifestyle option or whatever – will make us feel better, happier, more attractive and so on, then we will set our hearts on having it. The ad-men and ad-women would surely agree with Jesus that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also".

And I think St Francis knew this too. He understood that the way to train the heart is to choose its treasure carefully. He chose to treasure things that are not normally prized - the poor and the sick and a life without possessions – and through this his heart came to beat

with the love of Christ to the extent that the church calls him a saint – one of God’s holy ones.

So what does this mean for us? Well maybe it’s an invitation to think about the things we treasure, and what they are doing to our hearts. We might wonder who taught us what to treasure: was it our parents, our schooling, our newspaper or the shopping channel on TV? Or was it the gospel? And then we might wonder whether the things we treasure teach our hearts to love what God loves. Are they giving us a heart for God?

I had a little go at this self-questioning myself, and I have to admit that I didn’t like it very much. It showed me how fickle my heart is.

I think there are two things that follow from this.

The first is to remember that Francis did not become a saint overnight. Even those people who have a sudden conversion experience find that the conversion of a whole life takes a lifetime. No matter how far along the Christian journey we have come, we are still a work in progress. So the question is: What’s my next step?

The second point is that when we find ourselves far away from God, we are actually in just the right place for God to draw near to us. You will recognise immediately that this is the Gospel message: God in Christ comes among us, and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. When the gap between us and God seems too hard for us to bridge, we discover that Christ has already stepped over on to our side. So the process of discovering our need of God, and finding that Christ is already there for us, is one of the ways in which our hearts learn to treasure God.

St Francis once said, “If God can work through me, he can work through anyone.” And that must be true, because Jesus said, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Luke 18.27).