

St Francis of Assisi

Acts 2:42–47a, Psalm 119:161–168, 2 Cor 6:1–10, Matthew 6:24–33

Today we remember the well known saint, St Francis of Assisi who lived in the thirteenth century.

What do you think St Francis was like? Was he a lover of nature and of animals? Was he a radical follower of Jesus? Was he a humble, semiliterate, medieval figure. Was he a troubadour?

St Francis is perhaps one of the best known and best loved saints of all time. Unfortunately, there is much that is mythical around Francis' life. The romantic view of St Francis began in the 19th century. Many stories told that we don't know are true. Francis himself did not write a lot. One of the hymns he wrote we have just sung. *All creatures of our God and King*.

Did he preach to the birds? Stories are told of him preaching to all of God's creation, of the love and greatness of their Creator! Did he teach one of his followers to plant carrots upside down, to teach obedience? I don't know. Was he faithful to God? I believe so. St Bonaventure, one of his followers has written much about the Franciscan way of life and St Francis.

What we do know with some certainty is that St Francis brought a newness of faith, a radical return to learning from the gospels. He brought this into a dark time in the history of Christianity, digesting and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In many ways Francis is the saint for all times, and is certainly one who is an example of Christian living for our times, in the early years of the 21st Century.

Francis was also very much a young man of *his* time. The son of a wealthy merchant, he lived a very secular life, parties, being a troubadour, fighting, living a luxurious lifestyle, expected to go into his father's business. But Francis met God, and that changed his life.

What was Francis like?

He was the son of a rich merchant, born in 1181 or 1182, in Assisi, Italy. He died in 1226. As a child it seems he was spoilt and indulged by wealthy parents. He was a thrill-seeking teenager.

As a young man, Francis was into fine dressing and partying. He went to war, as was common for the well-to-do of his day; he was captured and ended up in prison. He later suffered illness and a subsequent spiritual crisis that turned his life around. His entry into religious life was deeply resented by his father,

probably not least because he spent some of his father's wealth on the poor and rebuilding the church.

But the church that Francis gave his life for was a church that had to some extent at least, lost its way. The young Francis was on fire for God!

A story is told of an important aspect of Francis' turning point, at which he saw a leper in the street and overcoming his fear of the disease, he embraced the leper. Lepers were treated very harshly in the middle ages, very much outcasts from society.

Late in his life, Francis wrote:

...for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards, I delayed a little and left the world.

In saying he 'left the world' Francis was speaking of his conversion, and decision to follow Christ.

The way of Francis is a radical return to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Francis' day many had forgotten how to live as Christians. There was much corruption in the church, and Francis stood out against this in a radical life of poverty and simplicity. He really lived the beatitudes; he took the words of Jesus at their face value.

Francis didn't write *Make me a channel of your peace*, which is actually based on an anonymous prayer, thought to be French. But the words can be said to echo Francis' words.

Francis read and lived the gospels! He believed that the church needed rebuilding and the faith needed reclaiming. He did rebuild a church and he did preach the gospel. The readings for today contain words that would gladden Francis' heart!

Let's look at them:

Acts reading speaks of the fellowship of the first believers. A radical new way of life!

They "...Devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common.

Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in

their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of the people.”

These first Christians were alive to the love of God and lived their faith boldly. This was the way that St Francis was drawn into faith, the way he lived his life!

2 Corinth 6 In this reading Paul tells the believers to endure hardships, to hold fast as faithful servants. The way he describes the walk of the faithful is just the way that Francis lived. Having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Matt 6. 24-33 you cannot serve money and God. Do not worry about your life. These readings are so Franciscan! But then they should be, Francis modelled his life on the scriptures!

It seems that Francis did not seek initially to set up an order, but his faith was infectious and men flocked to him, and wanted to follow Jesus by living Francis’ way of life. With more people wanting to join him, it was necessary to develop some structure to this way of life. Francis was never ordained as a priest.

Francis established an order, marked by love, humility and joy. (eventually officially approved by the Pope) It is based on poverty, charity (love) and simplicity. St Clare followed Francis and formed an order of her own. They had been friends together as they grew up and continued to be close in their lives of poverty within the orders. Clare established the Poor Clares.

The Anglican first order of St Francis requires its members to renounce secular possessions and live in poverty, humility and love, in an order apart from the world. The second order consists of the Poor Clares, also an enclosed order. In Francis’ time, increasing numbers of people wanted to commit their lives to Christ, through the order set up by Francis.

It was obvious that not everyone can leave family and work in the world to do that. And yet many are called to follow Christ. Francis, with others, established the Third Order.

“In the small village of Cannara in 1212, the fervour of Francis’ preaching caused such a holy uproar that practically the whole village wanted to abandon their home, and follow him.

He realised that if he went on like this whole boroughs would be depopulated, ordinary life would be disrupted, and family and commercial relations would have no base.”

The three orders of St Francis still exist. In the Third Order of Franciscans, men and women take vows and live by a rule, but live ordinary lives in the community. St Francis saw that there are different ministries and that not all are called to a radical following of Jesus in religious orders.

The gospels still speak those words of challenge to all who will listen today – could it be that we are in an era not unlike the era of t Francis, where many do not want to hear the gospel and the truth of God’s Word?

Francis’ love of God led him to give his life completely and serve his Lord. Francis was on fire with love, is this just too much for us these days? Perhaps there is a nicety about an Anglican type of faith practice that thinks this is a step too far. – and yet, I think of the words in the Anglican Daily Office, the prayers said daily by many across the Anglican communion within Australia:

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
So may the light of your presence, O God,
Set our hearts on fire with love for you;
Now and for ever. Amen.

As a Tertiary Franciscan I find it challenging to live such a life, and I know that I so often fall short of Francis' way.

In the Third Order, we each write our own rule of life, based on the rule of St Francis. But each person has to work this out for themselves, with the guidance of a spiritual director, or guide. The Third Order member then promises to keep this rule for one year, with annual renewal of commitment.

The parts of this rule are:

1. *The Eucharist*,
2. *Penitence*,
3. *Prayer and meditation*,
4. *Life-style*,
5. *Retreat*,
6. *Study*,
7. *Simplicity*, distribution of one's goods was a primary act in early Franciscan life. Very challenging in our materialistic times. This must be taken in regard to family and their needs, but sharing is involved in hospitality, provision of transport and how we use cars etc.
8. *Work*,
9. *Obedience*,
10. *Fellowship*

In all the life of a tertiary Franciscan is about living one's Christian life in the best way that I can. We are encouraged not to aim too high at first, lest we fail and become discouraged. But regular review of one's life is expected. We all anticipate continuing to grow and develop spiritually as long as we live.