

Saint Francis and his continuing presence in the life of the Christian community.

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Today is celebrated around the world church as the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi. I'm sure most of you recall the general outline of Francis' life and of how he has been remembered by the Christian community as a powerful example of a man who, along with his colleague Sister Clare of Assisi, devoted their lives to simple discipleship within the Way pioneered by Jesus. Saints are remembered as people like us but whose lives reflect an embodiment of the Jesus Way from which those of later times might learn. Francis simply took the words of Jesus seriously and acted them out within the circumstances of his time. I vividly recall the few days Kathleen and I spent in Assisi following days in and around the magnificence of St Peter's in Rome. Even the streets and air of Assisi felt simpler and more affirming of the way of Jesus.

Francis was born in 1182 into a wealthy Italian family and he died in 1226. By then his care for the poor, his appreciation of nature and his devotion to the way pioneered by Jesus was becoming legendary. Following parental and societal expectations he entered upon a military career and at age 20 was imprisoned following a skirmish between citizens of Perugia and his native Assisi. In the years that followed he felt himself to be pursued by God. His response was dramatic. Feeling called to live in continuity with the simple way of life pioneered by Jesus he gave up his right to family wealth, set aside military aspirations, embraced poverty as a way of life and held and kissed a leper to signify his intention to identify with the marginalised and needy. He became a preacher of God's love and travelled throughout Italy with others who became his brothers and sisters in faith. They sought to walk as nearly as they could 'in the footsteps of Jesus'. It is interesting to speculate why this somewhat eccentric and fanatical Middle Ages preacher has claimed the interest of Christ followers ever since. Is there something in us that yearns for the simplicity of love and faith within which he dwelt?

Early in his ministry Francis was at prayer before a crucifix in the little church of San Domiano near Assisi. Tradition says that the crucifix above the altar spoke to him: "Francis, do you not see how my house is falling into ruin? Go and repair it for me!" Believing the invitation referred to the shambolic state of the building in which he was praying Francis set about rebuilding the little church. Later he understood the invitation to repair the church in a deeper sense than the repair of a building. He dedicated his life to the rediscovery and rebuilding of the church understood as a community of ordinary people consciously living within the love of God and serving humanity. It was the inner spirit and actions of the church rather than the windows, roof and down pipes that needed repair.

Francis was not the only one seeking to rebuild the church at that time. Most notable among contemporary church builders was Pope innocent III (Pope 1198-1216), regarded as one of the most notable and powerful of the medieval Popes. He

reinforced the maxim that no one could be saved outside of the Roman Church, clarified church doctrine, and actively suppressed heretics who pushed the boundaries of belief. Innocent sought to dominate every area of society. He built a church dominated by the power of the great feudal lords with the Pope at the top of the feudal pyramid of power. He initiated the 4th and 5th crusades to make it clear that Jews and Muslims were inferior to Christians. He sought to rebuild the church on foundations of centralised power, coercion and domination.

Francis' path to the rebuilding of the church could not have been more different than the path chosen by Innocent III. His way was shaped by the primacy of love rather than coercive power. He sought to rediscover and to embody the simple, love shaped way of Jesus, the Galilean vision of an inclusive, peacemaking, reconciling, forgiving and generous way of life. Like Jesus before him he identified with the poor of his day and had an uncomplicated affection for the natural world and for animals as companions on life's journey. If Innocent III, like his Roman and Protestant successors of later generations, valued predictability, obedience and straight lines dividing the good from the bad, Francis lived within the ambiguities of human frailty, sought to break down barriers that divide the human family and valued the journey into love over obedience to creeds, confessions, doctrines and ecclesiastical custom. In the rule designed to guide those who identified with his attempt to mend the church and to rediscover the Way of Jesus Francis simply and powerfully said they should endeavour 'to walk in the footprints of Jesus'. Walking in the footprints of Jesus represents the Franciscan Spirit, which is a way of being Christian that has endured across the centuries since his dramatic life in 13th century Italy.

As I was re-entering the story of Francis in preparation for today, I was also re reading some writings of a dear friend of ours who lives in Perth. Neville is among the most interesting and devoted Christians we have known. He is now in his nineties and according to his own reckoning nearing the end of his journey. Like Francis, Neville too, has sought to walk in the footprints of Jesus within the ambiguities, complexities and confusion of our times. I'll share a little of his story along with reference to some notable moments in the life of Francis.

Neville, like St Francis, was born into family wealth. His father had been a notable politician and leader in western Australia and amassed a considerable fortune and social standing. In a little autobiography he wrote, Neville sums up his learnings in life, in particular that early on he had learned "the importance of downward mobility (for) having been born into a wealthy family, I could have easily been seduced into the mirage of high society and the pursuit of possessions." Neville, like Francis, broke with family ambitions for him and instead, having graduated as a lawyer, became a Methodist minister. He describes Jesus as "the man from God's tomorrow, the embodiment of beauty, truth, and love." Having served in a number of Methodist parishes in needy areas, Neville withdrew from parish based ordained Ministry and practiced law. He bought houses to accommodate refugee families and others in need; he gave generously to the church and to other worthy causes. He and his wife lived simply throughout their married and family life. They were generous with a

beachside holiday crib and a retreat in the hills behind Perth. They built the church where Neville still worships to a design that means it can be converted to a house if the community no longer needs it as a church. Renunciation, or at least redirection of wealth, is central to the Franciscan Spirit. Jesus encouraged it in his dealings with the wealthy. It is possible to gain wealth but to lose one's inner soul. Remember the story of Zacchaeus.

Francis is remembered for his care for the poorest of his day. He identified with a leper colony and is remembered for his willingness to welcome lepers with a kiss. In a similar manner Neville has been committed for decades to the cause of justice for Aboriginal people, the indigenous, and appallingly treated first people of Australia. As Methodist minister and as Human Rights lawyer he championed Aboriginal land rights and was arrested on many occasions when demonstrating on their behalf. As a lawyer he defended Aboriginal people and protesting groups on a pro bono basis and gained some notable legal victories in the courts. Identification with the poor and the marginalised (within the limits of one's strength and opportunity) is the flip side of identification with the Way of Jesus. It became second nature to Neville and his wife, Margaret. For many years they worked voluntarily in prisons with difficult offenders preparing them for eventual return to normal life. For years they lived adjacent to an Aboriginal settlement.

A most notable occasion in the story of Francis was when in 1219 he met with the Muslim Sultan al Kamal during the dreadful wars associated with the fifth crusade. It was assumed that Christians alone had access to healing wisdom and that it was the responsibility of good Christian leaders to convert or kill those who disagreed with this view. In September 1219, following a decisive victory by Muslim forces in the Nile Delta region, Francis, who had witnessed the killing, crossed into the space separating the warring armies and met for 3 days with Sultan al-Kamil. They discussed what separated them and shared in each other's prayers. They were pioneers in the practice of what became known as interfaith dialogue. Doubtless reflecting his experience with the Sultan, Francis included in the Franciscan rule that the brothers were 'to provoke no arguments nor strife with Muslims but were to treat them with respect and in a manner befitting the Way of love as pioneered by Jesus.' It's part of the Franciscan way – respect for all and a search for peace.

Neville is a lifelong pacifist, a pathway that for him is most consistent with the Way of Jesus. In 1990 he was part of an international Gulf Peace Team that endeavoured to place themselves between the opposing forces in the first of the Bush family Iraq invasions. His peace activism led to his arrest on many occasions and took him to war zones in Palestine and Bosnia. I have a treasured printed copy of Neville's journal during the four months he spent before and during the second Bush Iraq invasion in 2003 as part of an international Peace team. His journal tells of experiences observing and experiencing firsthand the horror of war induced violence. They literally lived between two warring armies. Conversations with suffering locals confirmed the futility and dishonest rationale of that conflict. Throughout he continued his long-standing practice of rising early for three hours of meditation, prayer, bible study and

journal writing. He sent accounts of this time back to Australia and radio stations and newspapers shared them with readers and listeners. Often his reports contradicted the propaganda of the Howard government. In the congregation of his home church, he was described as 'our man in Baghdad' representing them and the pathway of peacemaking in the spirit of Jesus that had also claimed them. His 10-year-old granddaughter wrote at the time, "My grandpa has gone to Iraq to comfort the Iraqi people while the Americans bomb them." Peacemaking is rarely simple – in the 13th or in the 21st centuries. It takes courage to swim against the current of patriotic and political fervour. It's walking in the footsteps of Jesus. It's the Franciscan spirit.

I have woven something of the story of our friend Neville into what I have said about Saint Francis – as my way of taking Francis from the 13th century and illustrating how his way of following Jesus, of placing his feet in the footprints of Jesus, is still alive. For me, Francis is important because he sought to break out of churchy custom and allowed the simplicity, freshness and courage of the Way of Jesus to flow freely in his troubled, divided and violent world. We need the Franciscan Spirit. What do you think? Thanks be to God.

To Ponder:

FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS: FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FRANCISCAN SPIRIT:

*"Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who treat you spitefully." Lk 6:27.

*"Take nothing for the journey, neither stick nor pack, neither bread nor money; nor are you to have a second coat." Lk 9: 3.

*"Beware! Be on your guard against greed of every kind, for even when someone has more than enough, his/her possessions do not give him/her life." Lk 12: 15.

*"No slave can serve two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and money." Lk 16: 13.

*"Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Here and now, sir, I give half my possessions to charity; and if I have defrauded anyone, I will repay four times over.'" Lk 19:8.

*"Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not worth more than the birds?" Matt 6: 26.

*"If you are not prepared to leave all your possessions behind, you cannot be my disciples." Luke 14:33.

*"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.... whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Lk 18: 14,17.

Do these and other gospel passages represent first century simplistic wisdom, now superseded in our more sophisticated times, are do they represent wisdom needing to be woven into, adapted to, twenty first century Christian living?

*Pope Innocent III and Francis represent two ways of reforming, strengthening the church. How do we rebuild the church in our day?