Sermon St Francis 3.09.21

Slide 1 Francis and birds

Why children’s drawings? Jungian Psychology tells us we are hard wired for story. Also, there are aspects of images that come into our awareness that are communal or collective. What we experience as most personal is in fact the most universal.

So, the story I’ll share may resonate in parts. Do you remember images from childhood books? I do. Sometimes images touch the deepest places of the self I have talked about in recent sermons.

View the story through Francis’ own words “preach the gospel at all times and if necessary use words”. How did his life bring him to such deep understanding?

Slide 2 Baptism

There was a struggle over his name. Mother wanted him named John after John the Baptist. The priest said “but he was a wild man!” Mother said “yes, but he was God’s wild man”. His father returned from a cloth buying trip and called him “my little Frenchie. France has made me rich I will call him Francis!”

I wonder if this struggle over his name was emblematic of the struggle in each of us between who the world tells us we are and what God would have us be?

Francis dreamt of becoming a Knight. As with each of us, God knows our dreams and encourages us to explore and experience so that our dream awareness is refined.

Slide 3 Fabric Shop

Francis was selling fabric for his father, and beggar came to the door Francis ignored him but felt badly. Later he ran through the streets and found the beggar. He gave him the money from the day’s sales and said “I will never ignore the poor again”.

Slide 4 On horseback

In pursuit of becoming a night his father kitted him out to go and fight the armies of the German Emperor.

Slide 5 Francis hands over his red cloak.

On the journey he saw a poor knight without appropriate clothing and with a skinny horse. Francis handed over everything. The knight said “but I can’t pay you”. Francis said “You already have for when I saw you, I felt the love of God rising in my heart”. Francis opened himself to deep unease. He had an awareness that enabled him to see beyond the surface. I wonder if we allow yourselves to do that?

Slide 6 Francis speaks to God in the darkness.

Francis had a question in his heart “Dearest Lord, what do you want me to do”? When he returned to the town without horse or cloak the townsfolk laughed!

Slide 7 In a cave.

He went into a cave for days. He had no interest in his father’s cloth business and he remembered the beggar at the door and he thought to himself “surely that feeling came from God”!

Slide 8Frances embraces a leper.

On the road when making a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis heard the tinkling of leper’s bell. Initially ran away, then he looked at the putrid leper and thought “if God loves me, surely he loves him too”. He ran back and hugged the leper who said: “No one has touched me in 12 years”. Francis was learning to question his own responses.

Francis returned from his pilgrimage without shoes or a cape. His father was angry, “do you think townsfolk will come here and buy while you are dressed like that?” Francis obeyed his father but he had no interest in selling cloth.

Slide 9 Francis in the Chapel of San Damiano.

One day he walked past the crumbling church of San Damiano. He slipped into a tiny chapel and knelt before a crucifix. It seemed to speak to him saying: “Rebuild my house.” Francis ran home loaded a cart and horse with his father’s finest fabrics and galloped to the market. He sold everything including the horse and took a bag of gold to the priest who said: “Your father will be angry”! Francis threw the gold into a corner and asked the priest to allow him to sleep in the church saying: “I should not go home now”.

Slide 10 Francis and his Mother.

His furious father hunted for him down and on the next buying trip to France he locked Francis in the cellar. His mother let Francis out, gave him money and blessed him in God’s name. I wonder how many of us have been spiritually guided by our mothers, or mothered lovingly by a father or some other?

Slide 11 Francis gives his clothes to his father.

On his return, from France his father threatened Francis and took him before the bishop in the hope of retribution. He said to Francis “you stole from me! Francis acted saying: “I happily return to Peter Bernadone everything I have that is his”. He stripped off his clothes and gave them to his father. The crowd gasped at the stark-naked Francis. The father never spoke to his son again. Francis ran to the Bishop’s gardening shed and took a gardener’s smock and a piece of rope to tie the waist.

Slide 12 Francis’ friars.

This form of dress was adopted by his friars.

Slide 13 Francis cuts Clare’s hair.

A beautiful noblewoman of Assisi named Clare wanted to live like Francis. She was inspired by Francis’ teaching as he spoke of God as our lover, and of the sun and moon praising the creator.

One night she met Francis in a forest clearing. She knelt and dedicated her life to prayer and the poor. Francis cut off her hair. A pursuing band sent by her father arrived in the hope of stopping the proceedings. Too late said Clare “this is the only marriage I want. To love God and serve the poor all my days.” And she did.

Slide 14 Francis talked to the birds.

Francis walked and preached. He taught that all creation is related. He talked to the birds. “You must never cease to praise your creator” he told them.

Slide 15 Francis rescues the birds and builds them a nest.

He rescued some caged turtle doves from a lad. He said to the birds “why did you let yourself be caught by that boy? You are special birds! You found the dry land for Noah and you descended on Jesus at his baptism.” I will help you build new nests. He did and sang to the birds and they sang back.

Slide 16 The cave Nativity.

At Christmas Francis created the first nativity scene in a nearby cave. People took animals and torches. Francis said: “look on the place where the Lord of the universe arrived as a helpless infant surrounded by animals and dusty hay. Jesus came bearing God’s love”.

Slide 17 The flaming angel and the stigmata.

At a Mountain top retreat called La Verna, Francis crossed a stream on a plank then had a friar take the plank away. There he wrapped himself in nature and periods of endless prayer. He had a miraculous vision, of an angel with flaming wings outstretched as a cross. On his own body he saw the wounds of Christ; the Stigmata. Francis said “Jesus bore those wounds because God so loved the world.” Two years later he died aged 46.

What does this life-story teach us? To listen to the whispering voice within, to check our emotional response to situations. In Jungian terms, Francis’ attention passed beyond the superficial to the depths of the transpersonal. It was in the images of creation that Francis experienced the abundance of God’s love. May our whispering souls lead us on such a journey of discovery.

AMEN

Reference

Joyce Denham and Elena Temporin *St Francis of Assisi* Lion Hudson Oxford London 2007 (Passim)

Linda Fiske 3.10.2021