

27th Sunday Year A Mary Mags

Isaiah 5.1-7, Matthew 21.33-43

4th October 2020 (Not the Feast of St Francis)

Fr Peter Groves

The Italian name Giovanni is the equivalent of the English John. Of the countless people so named, few have been as influential as the John born in Umbria around the year 1181. His father was a wealthy merchant, whose success in trading abroad allowed his seven children to sample some of the finer things of life which he brought from foreign lands. This may explain why his father gave John the nickname “Frenchman”. He enjoyed the carefree life of the young nobleman, and followed his friends in joining up to fight for his native city, but was captured and imprisoned for almost a year.

His life changed after his return home. More and more conscious of the needs of those less fortunate, John underwent a process of spiritual conversion which culminated in a vision of Christ himself. While praying in the church of San Damiano, he saw and heard the Lord speaking to him from the crucifix above the altar: rebuild my house, which lies in ruins. He took Christ at his literal word, and used his father's money and produce to repair the church building. His father disowned him, and John gladly renounced his wealth with his patrimony to embrace the life of poverty to which he was called. Henceforth he would be known not as Giovanni Pietro di Bernardone, but rather only by his nickname, Frenchman. In Italian, Francesco, to us Francis from a town called Assisi.

On this day when we give thanks to God for the fruits of his creation, we are reminded by our Scripture readings of the abundance of blessing with which God has provided us in the vineyard which is his creation. And it is fitting that we do so on October 4, a day

which would ordinarily be kept as the feast of St Francis of Assisi. Sunday, of course, is always the Lord's day, and St Francis' celebration cannot replace that, but his example should nevertheless inspire our reflection and our devotions.

When we come to speak of St Francis we should remind ourselves of some things which are not true as well as some things which are. Francis was not the cuddly person that sentimentality has projected into our own age. You may have heard of his particular affection for animals. Something of a myth. There are early stories associating him with nature and its creatures, but these are nothing to do with a sickly love of fluffy bunnies, and everything to do with the centrality of the doctrine of creation in his own life and in his spiritual teaching. Since today for us is Harvest Festival, we would normally be singing the hymn "All creatures of our God and King". Its words offer a paraphrase of Francis's own remarkable Cantic of the Sun, a poem and prayer in which he addresses the

things of God's creation as brother and sister, because as creatures of the same creator, we share an equal relationship of dependence to the father who is the source of all our life. From that, nothing whatsoever follows about finding God in furry things, indeed Francis explicitly forbade the brethren of the order he founded from keeping pets.

It's also worth observing that Francis was clearly a person so remarkable as to be quite impossible. Our gospel reading concerned a vineyard, and Umbria would have been full of them. There would also have been plenty of ale, but it's entirely fair to say that Francis couldn't have organized the proverbial drinking session in a brewery. Few people in Christian history were less suited to founding and managing even one community, let alone an international society for Christian mission and devotion. The Franciscan order was riven by division even within its founder's lifetime, and the realities of the mediaeval church meant that control of the Franciscan world was

perhaps better suited to the politicians and scholastic theologians who succeeded Francis.

But Francis' otherworldliness was far from insignificant. His call was not to control, but to an ever closer union with the creator God manifested in the redemption of the world by Jesus Christ. Francis was *otherworldly* because he was holy, a living imprint of the life of Christ. But Francis was also entirely *worldly*, because that imprint was nothing less than a bodily instantiation of God's suffering and self-giving in the life of the incarnation. So close was Francis to the passion of Christ as the centre of his world, that he was actually physically united to that passion while seeking God in prayer. Francis was the first to be granted the gift of the stigmata, receiving the very wounds of Christ as the love of God burned into and through him in his imitation of Jesus.

The physicality of the love of God, poured out in the gifts of creation and the glories of nature, lived out in the suffering of Christ embraced and undergone for the transformation of that broken and beautiful world, these are the heart of the life and the mission of St Francis. Thanksgiving for the goodness of God in the abundance which we are so privileged to enjoy, can never be true thanksgiving if it is removed from the reality of that passionate love. God saw his creation, and it was very good, but God did not and does not admire from a distance.

During this calendar year, we have discovered all too closely our vulnerability to the biological world, but in so doing we are also discovering what life is like for a vast proportion of humanity: a precarious existence lived in the midst of need and want and the reality of death. The scandal of that need and want remains the stumbling block against which Jesus warns us in the gospel. Those who would enter the kingdom of heaven should seek the childlike innocence and devotion we

find exemplified in St Francis, but we are all too eager to possess and control, to pretend that the vineyard of creation is our own, so that the love of the creator is excluded and even killed by the tenants of self and of greed. Francis's desire to live at one with the reality of creation is not a desire to separate oneself from reality of suffering, or indeed from our brothers and sisters whose agonies cry out to their creator much more worryingly than they ever cry out to us. If the sun and the moon are my brother and sister, and they are, how much greater is my obligation to the kinsfolk who are just like me, whose trials and perils and exploitation could and can so easily be mine.

Francis lived a life so very ordinary, to begin with. A rich playboy, a soldier, a son who quarrelled with his father. And yet there are few people in Christian history so clearly and so powerfully used by God as the vehicles of his transforming love. Francis' own transformation, from the rich young man to the one who sells all that he has and gives to the poor, is a type of the transformation which God would bring

about in every single one of us. There is no Christian life which is not an imitation of Christ, and there is no imitation of Christ unless we, like Francis, are joined in prayer to the Father and touched by the fire of the crucified.