

Sunday 3 October 2010: Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Harvest

Readings: Micah 6.6-8; Luke 12.22-33

Today here at St Martin-in-Fields we celebrate the harvest – “Let the whole earth bless the creator”.

Before I say anything more let us just pause for a moment to notice those gifts all around. It has become something of a habit to use harvest to bemoan our failures as human stewards of creation, as well we might... But before that, should we not for a moment give thanks? This whole church is filled with the miracle and fruit of creation in all its colour and variety. Here in our church this morning are sheaves of wheat, hops, milled flour, and baked bread. Here are apples and cheeses, and eggs and bursts of flowers of every autumnal colour. Here in the centre of the city are the fruits of the soil. Just for a moment let us recognize these things. Yesterday, a man stood at the entrance of this church staring. “It reminds me of my childhood,” he said, “it’s like harvest.” “Yes,” I said, “that’s what it is, harvest.” It awakens memories in all of us, revelations of a power, and a creativity, and a goodness beyond us all. Smell it, breathe it in, as the fruits and seeds drop and the leaves change colour – in our countryside, our farms, our gardens, our parks, in the trees we pass at the side of the road, in the smell of the air: the life of creation, offered up. In the words of George Herbert: “Thou hast *given so much* to me, Give *one thing more*, - a grateful heart.”

As we celebrate this day we also celebrate a saint who died on this day – 3rd October in 1226 – still the most popular saint who ever lived. His name is Francis of Assisi. Here is a saint for creation, who calls us to see things, really see things, and listen to them too: calls us to see the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, the flowers, the birds, the trees, the fruits, the water, the sky, not as strangers but each part of creation as something intimately related to each one of us, as we have just heard in the Canticle of creation: brother sun, sister moon, mother earth.

There are certain teachings of Christ that we struggle with. How, for example can we live today’s Gospel? It is on the one hand such a simple call to trust: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear, for life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens, they neither sow nor reap, they neither have storehouses nor barns and yet God feeds them.” Such a simple direct message and yet so completely and radically contrary to the whole unremitting message of a consumer society that to be is to have, have more, worry more, hurry more; more variety, more beauty, more taste, more fragrance, more youth, more style, more space, more choice, more luxuries, more speed, more communication, more Gigabytes, more sex, more celebrity, more money.

And yet St Francis seems to symbolise a hope that a greater simplicity is not only something possible, but beautiful, both to God and to humanity. There is a poetry of action in his life which draws us to him and makes us long to rediscover that relationship both with the creator and the creation.

Early this year I was able to visit Assisi in Italy, the home of St Francis. It is, as many of you will know, a beautiful city, perched on a hill, looking out over the Umbrian valleys on one side, and the Mount Sabasio on the other. It is a place infused with the peace of St. Francis. Early on Sunday morning I set off first to the Basilica of Santa Chiara. In the side chapel hangs the San Damiano Cross, the Crucifix that all those years ago spoke to St Francis calling him to rebuild the Church; a Church which had like our own often lost touch with the God it

claimed to worship; a Church which had become defensive of itself, its wealth, its doctrines, its rules and rituals, so defensive that the Church called to witness of Christ in the world could be the very thing blocking out and negating the light and love of God, cold-hearted and speaking not of life but of death; a Church often trying to cover its failures and abuses and divisions rather than bringing them into the light and love of forgiveness and healing. Francis, in his life and teaching, reconnected the Church with the humility of Jesus. He was to realise that the Church was not a building but the people of God. Francis' life had been transformed on the day he had been riding his horse and seen a leper in his path. In an impulsive act he found himself dismounting from his horse and kissing the leper – his hands and face. Later, in his writing, Francis was to describe how God led him into the company of the poor who became for him the source of spiritual strength and growth – they opened his eyes to the reality of Christ's presence in the world. Francis was no stranger to suffering, but in that suffering he discovered the wounds of Christ, windows into the unfathomable love of God. Francis' spirit renewed everything around him. He humanized the divine. Look at the way he became the rich source of inspiration for artists such as Giotto on the front of our service book, or Cimabue – in whose art the faces began to reflect the radiant aspects of Christianity: goodness, gentleness, love, sorrow.

Below the San Damiano cross are the words of St Francis Prayer:

Most High, all Glorious God
Enlighten the darkness of my heart
Give me right faith
Certain hope
Perfect charity
With deep humility
Wisdom and understanding that I may know to do your most holy will
Amen

As I read these words, then, and many times since, I think that Francis has got it right. The words that always strike me are his request for deep humility.

That morning in Assisi, I began to climb up the long steep hill to the Carceri, the caves on Mount Sabasio, where Francis and his Brothers used to go to pray. There was no-one on the road, just me and the whole of God's creation – over an hour's steep walk. There are moments in our lives when we are numbed by life. There are other moments when all our senses seem alert and present and awake to the beauty of everything around us. It was such a morning; clear, crisp light, up the zigzagging road into the hills: the rhythm of the steps, the exhilaration of the climb, breathing in, breathing out.

Francis chose the most beautiful places in Italy for his places of prayer. At the Carceri, the caves are surrounded by pine trees and a huge valley which opens up and drops right down to the plains below. I walked through the trees and the wind was blowing clouds of soft snow off the branches into the sunlight. I was stopped in my tracks, held in a sheet of sunlight, overwhelmed by the beauty of it all. Perhaps all of us in our lives experience moments of revelation – 'thin' places. I recalled the words heard by Peter, James and John as Jesus was transfigured before them: "This is my son my beloved listen to him." The light of Christ is a light Christ wants to share, a light which transfigures us too; a son-ship, a daughter-ship, into which we too are included. We are acceptable; we are pleasing to him, just as he is pleasing to God. Here in creation we can become aware of God's humility. What do I mean by God's humility? I mean that this incredible creation, this incredible mystery and miracle of life and God's love is entrusted to us. It is God's offering.

But the world, as we are realising, is not some great massive superstore we can simply unceasingly plunder for our profit. We cannot go on and on taking, blind to the consequences of our action. No, we are waking up to the fact that we are called to live in relationship with a world fragile, unique and of endless variety and difference, before we force more and more of it into extinction. This world, this creation, is our mother, our father, our brother, our sister, our lover, our sustainer. It is the source of our life, and we too are the source of its life. It is deserving of deep respect. Our actions matter. Our whole *world* is the Church of God through which we are called into a new relationship. This new humanity, this new awareness is a vulnerable place in which to stand with our defences down: aware of the damage already done, aware of human potential, but aware also of the danger of doing nothing. Each part of creation is diminished, each human being is diminished by the pain or suffering or hunger or thirst of another, and each part can be enriched by the gift, or the holiness, or the offering of another. We belong to each other.

Last Tuesday night many of us had the breathtaking experience of being in this church as St John's Bible was celebrated in word, music and astonishing images from the illuminations of first handwritten Bible to be completed in the last 500 years, a facsimile of which has been given to St Martin's. This east window of ours became a lattice and a ladder of colour and images. It was as though, like the angels on Jacob's ladder, we glimpsed the living relationship of heaven and earth of which these sacred texts and music spoke. On this east window we saw creation coming out of darkness, we saw and heard images as our Creed will later describe, of how God sowed the sea with shoals of fish, scattered birds across the sky, set land pelting with the chase of life, and mapped and lit the constellations. We saw the world rising before us: translucent, beautiful, the vulnerable womb of life, and on this window we saw the image of the Word made flesh, flesh like you and me, and then the image of tiny crosses like falling leaves, like seeds coming towards us and showering down upon us, wanting to find soil in which to grow. We are not here in this church to worship dead words and old rituals. We are not here to take part in an ancient cultic ritual of the past. We are not here to proclaim death, but life. Our faith is a call into communion with the living God and all creation. We too, are each an intricate part of God's pattern, together part of God's woven fabric, the poetry of life, like angels held together by the unseen lattice-work of God's love coming down and rising up upon the Son of Man.

Let all things their creator bless
And worship in humbleness
O praise him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

For where your treasure is there will your heart be also.