

## **In the footsteps of Paul and Francis**

A sermon preached by Revd Joanna Coney on the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Trinity 4 Oct 2020

*Refs: Isaiah 5: 1-7; Philippians 3: 4b-14; Matthew 21: 33-end*

Last Sunday Andrew gave us a wonderful sermon on the reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians on a passage that immediately precedes the one we have heard this morning and which follows on with Paul spelling out in no uncertain way what it means and what is needful to be followers of Christ.

So Paul tells us of his own experience of his conversion – the result of which was a complete revolution of his values. A complete re-ordering and reversal of the priorities he had been living with before he knew Christ – leading him on to develop and enter into a completely new way of relating to God. His priorities **had** been rooted in the values of this world, good though they might be in themselves, but now his conversion to Christ convinced him that things of this world were of no importance whatever compared with following Christ.

Paul had grown up as a good law-abiding Jew – faithful in every particular to the Law – as a Pharisee showing unstinting zeal to the law – to the extent that he was an active persecutor of the emerging Christian church. But now – since his conversion – he sees that all that is not so important – what really matters is both knowing and following Christ. What he had seen as gain is now turned into loss – in Christ all his standards and values have been turned upside down. He does not denigrate the Law but he sees it as overtaken by faith.

And so – with his characteristic energy and enthusiasm Paul tells us that he now sees Christ as everything and throws himself wholeheartedly into living as much like Christ as possible. And this of course included following Him in his sufferings, even including his crucifixion and his death, and in becoming in a real way a partner with Christ in those sufferings.

So Paul's whole life now consists of straining forwards on this into eternal life – the eternal life that is realised only at death. Paul believed and lived by the Law but now his priorities were completely overtaken by living in faith, in the sure conviction that this was the only way to eternal life. He became wholly committed to live his life as much like Christ's as he could – including welcoming suffering and death. He had come to see that everything else that he **had** seen as important had become loss. Giving his whole life to Christ was everything and he is fully and utterly committed to live this way for the rest of his life.

Today, October 4<sup>th</sup>, as well as Paul we also celebrate a saint who was equally as committed and single minded as Paul. For today is the feast of St Francis of Assisi, probably the best known Saint and certainly the one who has most books written about him, some historical, some spiritual, and sadly many based largely on the writer's imaginations!

There cannot be many people who do not know something of Francis if only of his love of creation and the natural world. And that he is now seen as the patron saint of the Environment. They say he preached to birds and animals but I believe that it was the other way round, and it was the wonders of nature, the birds and animals and plants that preached to **him**. As each and every one spoke to him of the love and goodness of God.

If we look at Francis more deeply we see that his faith, his commitment to Christ and indeed his whole life was a clear demonstration and echo of St Paul's. As Paul was converted from believing in the primacy of the Law so Francis was converted from the high life of a 'lad about town' who had caused mayhem in Assisi as he and his friends revelled in the good things of this world and whose priority was wealth and having a good time – sometimes to the despair of his family and indeed probably all of the citizens of the town as well.

But then he underwent a powerful conversion experience which, like Paul, brought him to realise that none of these things mattered in comparison to living with Christ, following his ways and seeing all else of little importance. He, like Paul, saw the things of this world no longer things of gain but of loss. His one aim and his whole life became totally focussed on becoming as Christ-like as was humanly possible. His priorities had been completely turned upside down and he went to enormous lengths to identify as closely as possible

with Christ himself. Indeed towards the end of his life he prayed unceasingly that, in order to enter into the life of Christ more completely, and come to identify more with him in everything, he begged in prayer that he might be granted the actual experience of sharing in Christ's suffering, by receiving in his own body the five wounds of Christ. His longing and prayer were indeed granted to him to the extent that he did indeed receive in his body the stigmata – that is the exact five wounds of Christ – in his feet, his hands and his side. And we are told that these marks remained with him as open wounds right up until his death. He craved this suffering only to understand and experience Christ's suffering, to become as like him as possible in everything and even unto death.

So to go back to St Paul we can see how both he and St Francis were driven by the same powerful internal force of longing to be as Christ-like as they could in every way possible. Their whole life was committed to this above all else. To our reserved Western and British outlook we may perhaps look at them both and feel that what they did, and how they did it, was a bit over the top but we can learn so much just by looking at them and being over-awed by the lengths they went to live by their belief in the primacy and imperative of following Christ in everything.

There are, I think, two principles they both lived by that we can learn from. **Firstly** they heard and responded to the internal and irresistible pull to live as Christ lived. They held nothing back, had no hesitation in putting this in the forefront of all they did and how they lived. There were no 'ifs' or 'buts', no hesitation but just wholehearted investment of all they were and all they had to Christ. For them nothing less than everything was enough.

And **the second** thing we might learn from them is their utter life-long commitment and devotion to this way of life above all else. And there are folk who today try to model their lives on Francis and to follow his example who also strive to commit themselves to it just as wholeheartedly however feebly and inadequately. Yesterday I was at a celebration of someone just embarking on their journey in the way of Francis, taking her lifelong solemn vows to commit her life to Christ in the footsteps of Francis and undertaking to stay on this path for the rest of her life, indeed until her death. She was being admitted to a form of Vowed Franciscan Monasticism that may be undertaken by keeping the life-long profession and vows to a form of monasticism lived out, not behind walls, but out in the everyday world. For Franciscans those who make these vows are known as the Third Order of the Society of St Francis and in our congregation here at St Peters there are already six of us trying to live under these vows that we made at our Profession many of us many years ago.

As I witnessed yesterday our latest member taking her vows it took me back over thirty years when I did just that. Of course, I and indeed any of us cannot in our frailty keep in any way perfectly the vows we made at our profession. But the two principles seen today in the example of Paul and Francis are always before us and encouraging us. We, like them, have felt and responded to the pull towards living as much like Christ as we can and we made our life-long commitment to do so. We, to quote Paul again, strive to regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord and to regard all else as loss in order to gain Christ and to be through faith found in Him.

We may not be very good at it but we, in the strength of Christ and in the footsteps of Francis continue to struggle on as best we can. And so I'd like to end by praying again our Collect set for today – a prayer that sums it all up so beautifully. Let us pray.

*Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you: pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.*

**Amen.**