

**Solemnity of St Francis of Assisi
Patron of our Parish**



Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 50: 1, 3-4, 6-7.

From the Wisdom of ben Sirach – translated by his grandson from Hebrew into Greek. Francis, resplendent like the sun, shines forth in the temple of God.

Matthew 11: 25-30.

You have hidden these things from the wise and the clever and revealed them to infants.

Reflection

St FRANCIS – JOY AND DREAMS

At the heart of our Franciscan way of life, our mission, if you like, as the Parish of St Francis, is **the joy** of St Francis. We, who belong to St Francis Parish, have got to go through the world, in joy and gladness. No one will believe that a miserable member of St Francis, an unhappy parishioner, is the bearer of good news. As Nietzsche wrote, ‘Christ’s disciples should **look** more redeemed’. St Francis and his early brethren certainly looked redeemed: they were filled with joy.

People will be drawn to the gospel if they find in us an inexplicable joy; a joy which makes no sense if God does not exist. People should be attracted and puzzled by our joy. It should be a living question mark and an invitation. I remember in Jerusalem (on pilgrimage from Glasgow) one night seeing Hassidic Jews dancing. When I saw their **joy** - then I saw their faith.

When I worked, during the war, in the coal-mines, I remember how, during the pit holidays the pit-ponies were taken up for the only time in the year – one week. When they saw the sky and the green grass they galloped and pranced and cavorted around the field. I thought of that when I read Meister Eckhart saying that ‘God’s joy is like a horse galloping around a field, kicking its heels in the air for fun’. God’s joy.

I remember reading the biography of William Wilberforce by William Hague. I was struck by this quote from him after he, William Wilberforce, ‘got religion’: ‘My grand objection to the religious system still held by many who declare themselves orthodox Churchmen... my objection is, that it tends to render Christianity so much a system of prohibitions rather than of privilege and hopes, and thus the injunction **to rejoice** so strongly enforced in the New Testament is practically neglected, and Religion is made to wear a

forbidding and gloomy air and not one of peace, and hope, and joy?’



I think it was this attitude that meant that Wilberforce, the key man in the abolition of slavery (a not very popular cause at the time) was never shunned; he wasn't shunned socially; he wasn't shunned politically; he combined what had always been an appealing personality with the force of steadfast belief.

Wilberforce had a natural cheerfulness and a great interest in everything that was going on: 'religion' never made Wilberforce dreary, melancholy or intolerant. Mrs Sykes, (I think she was a relative by marriage), referring to his taking religion seriously, said: 'if this is madness, I hope that it will bite us all?'

The joy of Francis was the joy of a poor man who received everything as a gift. Because he owned nothing, he lived in a world of utter generosity. Every meal was a gift, a present, a grace. It is said that at the Chapter of mats, he astonished St Dominic with his confidence that the 5000 Friars would be fed by gifts (I Fiorreti 18)!

This dependence on 'the table of the Lord' wasn't just optimism. It was a way of being in the world, which saw **everything** as gift. St. Francis was a man who was always astonished by the gifts that God gave him; food and drink, light and water, brothers and sisters, and even existence. G. K Chesterton said that he 'taught us **the grammar** of gratitude '. To be a beggar was to live in a world of **gifts**, and so Francis always had the joy of an eternal Christmas. Franciscan joy is rooted in seeing the world with gratitude.

Francis' rejected the world of his father. His father, Pietro Bernadone, was a merchant, a man of the market. Since that day the whole world has become a market place. Everything has become a commodity; everything has got its price.

Francis and Franciscans are in stark contrast to this.

You can see this especially in the stories of St Francis and the animals. These stories do a lot more than

suggest that Francis ‘liked pets’. There’s always something more behind all these stories; they’re not as naïve as they seem. When Francis preached to the birds or reconciled the citizens of Gubbio to the wolf, we get a glimpse of the Kingdom of God breaking through at that moment; it’s what Isaiah talks about, when ‘The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together - and a little child shall lead them’. (Isaiah 11.6).

When he preached to the fishes, we’re told that the fish went away happy. I’m a bit of a cynic; my first reaction to that story was to wonder how you know if a fish is happy! But I’m wrong: it is the Kingdom breaking through; penetrating our logical, rational, materialistic, efficient world

This Franciscan joy offers an invitation to our post-modern world. We live in a society that has largely lost its dreams of the future. I grew up in at a time when we still believed that humanity was going somewhere: for some people it was a Capitalist Paradise and for other people it was a Socialist Paradise. But there was the shared belief in a future: it was called ‘Progress’. Cars were just coming in; then aeroplanes; then the cars and planes got faster every year. Countries were liberated from the tyrannical rule of other countries (including Great Britain). Even the food in England got better. [You could eat frogs’ legs and snails. The Kingdom must be near!] These dreams were summed up in the famous speech of Martin Luther King, on August 28th 1963, ‘I have a dream’. The dream was of freedom, when, he said, ‘when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”



Fifty years later, those dreams have largely been lost. The Berlin Wall **has** fallen, the Cold War **is** over, **but** as Francis Fukuyama wrote in 'The End of History and the Last Man' we live in 'The **Now** Generation', a generation that's afraid to think of tomorrow.

There's not much idea of a shared sense of humanity being on the way to a common destiny; not much idea of triumph over poverty and injustice. Yes, we've had some victories; Apartheid **has** been destroyed and the Soviet Empire **is** no longer there. But ...but.....

I think that, especially in a time of pandemic, we do need to **dream**, if the gospel is going to be spread. We need a joy of a foretaste of the happiness of the Kingdom. Our joy should repudiate being resigned to the way things are; not accept being fatalistic. Oscar Wilde wrote that no map of the world is accurate if it does not include Utopia.

I'd like to finish with a story, well, perhaps, not quite a story. A bit of a parable, I think, especially suited for a Franciscan Parish. The story tells of what I call **rerouted dreams** and **glory in unexpected places** – or perhaps, better, an unexpected **kind** of glory. It goes like this:

Once upon a time in a forest, three young trees were growing side by side. As they grew, they shared with one another their dreams of what they would become when they grew to be big trees. The first tree said, “My dream is to become part of a luxury home where a lot of famous people come and go and admire the grain and colour of my wood.”

The second tree said: “My dream is to become the tall mast of an elegant sailing vessel that journeys to the seven seas,”

And the third said, “My dream is to become part of a great tower, so high that it will inspire people who look at it. People will come from all over the world to see it.”

And so the young trees dreamed.

Eventually the trees grew to maturity and were cut down. The first didn’t become a part of a luxurious house, as it had dreamed, but instead some of its wood was fashioned into a wooden trough to hold the hay that animals ate: it became a simple manger.

The second tree didn’t become the tall mast of an elegant ship, as it had dreamed, but instead it became the sides of an ordinary fishing boat like a lot of others on the Sea of Galilee.

The third tree didn’t become part of a tall tower, as it had dreamed, but was fashioned into the beams of a cross and used for a crucifixion.

Some of our dreams may need to be re-routed – but, whatever happens, don’t forget, don’t lose, our Franciscan dream, our Franciscan JOY!



St Francis of Assisi

is often remembered as one of the most Christ-like of saints, a man who imitated Our Lord so closely that he was rewarded with the stigmata. To live like St Francis is primarily to love Jesus — in the Eucharist, where Francis recognised “the Poor Christ” continuing to humble himself in the form of Bread and Wine; and in the sacred humanity of Christ, through which God’s love came to mankind (an insight which led to the saint creating the first Christmas scene). You can follow Francis by embracing a life of evangelical simplicity uncluttered by unnecessary attachments. “Seek first the Kingdom of God”, then use your possessions prudently, never letting them become your gods. Love the Church, remembering how Francis was asked by Christ to rebuild the Church through the holiness of his life and by encouraging others to conversion. Also, give praise to God for the majesty of the visible world, understanding how such praise is due to the Creator rather than creation itself. Strive to see the unity and interdependence of living things, and perhaps take the advice of Francis to give a patch of your garden solely to the wild and the beautiful.



St Francis' Prayer before the Crucifix

Most High glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart.
Give me right faith, sure hope
and perfect charity.
Fill me with understanding and knowledge
that I may fulfil your command.