

Collins Street Baptist Church, Season of Creation, 8 October 2006

Readings: Hosea 2:18-23 and Mark 1:9-12

Dr Jane Goodall, famous for her work amongst chimpanzees in Tanzania, tells the story of something that happened about ten years ago at an American zoo. The story is about a chimpanzee named Joe-Joe who was born in Africa and arrived as a two-year-old to live for eight or nine years in a small square cage. Then the zoo raised enough money to build a huge enclosure to hold more chimpanzees, and it was surrounded by water, which was an effective boundary since chimps don't swim.

One day, Joe-Joe, was challenged by one of the new young males. The older chimp knew nothing about fighting, and he was so frightened that he jumped into the water. He came up three times, gasping for air, and then disappeared.

A visitor to the zoo named Rick Swope witnessed all this, and in spite of attempts to restrain him, he also jumped into the moat. He swam under the murky water until he felt the chimpanzee's body, and pulled him to the surface. He managed to push Joe-Joe up onto the bank.

Rick turned to go back to his slightly hysterical family. At this point, three adult male chimpanzees were charging towards him, with hair bristling and teeth showing. At the same time, Joe-Joe was sliding back down the bank. Rick looks towards his family, he looks up at the chimps bearing down on him, and then at Joe-Joe who is once again

disappearing under the water. He goes back into the water and pulls the drowning chimp up onto the bank, and the aggressive chimpanzees stop to watch. After a while, Joe-Joe raises his head, water dribbles from his mouth, and then he takes a few tottery steps.

When Rick was asked what possessed him to do this, he said, “Well, I just happened to look into his eyes, and it was like looking into the eyes of a man and the message was: 'Won't anybody help me?'”

I don't know whether Jane Goodall has any Christian convictions, but sometimes when she has told this story, she has linked it to the compassion Albert Schweitzer showed for animals, and she urges us all to find within ourselves the same compassion. Schweitzer was a famous biblical scholar and musician, who gave up his successful life in Germany to become a missionary doctor in Africa.

But this morning we are considering another model of compassion in the life of St Francis of Assisi. I want to suggest that St Francis provides a model of the Christian motivations that can kindle a passion for the environment, beginning from the basic insight we discussed last week – that the Spirit of God brings life to all creatures.

In our Gospel reading from Mark 1, we find the enigmatic reference to Jesus being “with the wild animals”. The Gospel writers make no attempt to explain this strange behaviour, probably because the audience was familiar with the idea in the Hebrew Bible that God would make a covenant with the wild animals. As we read in Hosea 2:18, “I will make

for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety”. The focus here is precisely on those animals who are beyond the fringe of culture – the threatening and undomesticated ones, who are perhaps the most difficult for humans to love.

It is also these animals who feature in stories about St Francis. Even the biographers writing a few years after his death in 1226 testify to “the friendly union that Francis established with all things”, including his famous affection for a wolf who was threatening the city of Gubbio. We may be inclined to think of such stories as legendary, but whatever their historicity, they disclose a theology which has inspired generation after generation of Franciscan followers.

His first biographer and friend, Thomas of Celano, told how Francis was filled with compassion for “reptiles, birds, and other creatures, sensible and insensible”, calling them “brother” and “sister” – perhaps a theological version of Steve Irwin. Not only did Francis feel the kinship of all creatures, he apparently would exhort noisy crickets to “praise your Creator with a joyful song”. As Celano puts it, “He exhorted with the sincerest purity cornfields and vineyards, stones and forests and all the beautiful things of the fields, fountains of water and the green things of the gardens, earth and fire, air and wind, to love God and serve him willingly.” He walked over rocks with reverence for the God who was called a rock.

Indeed, while St Francis never confused the distinction between Creator and creation, his views approach the animism ascribed to traditional Aboriginal cultures. “The Franciscan universe is never dead”, one theologian has suggested, “all things are alive and personal”.<sup>1</sup>

In a recent collection of essays from the United Nations University entitled *Decolonizing Knowledge*, one author argues that Christian theology *conditioned* the Western habit of sharply distinguishing between humans and other living beings, and this has led eventually to ecological crises. The author contrasts this with most *non*-Western cultures, and notes that the influential biologist J.B.S. Haldane moved in the 1960s from Britain to India because he sensed that the cultural climate there would be more favourable to the development of his biological research. In one of Haldane’s essays, he does refer to this sharp distinction between humans and other species in Christian theology, but he goes on to say “this may well be a perversion of Christianity. St Francis seems to have thought so”.<sup>2</sup>

The universal kinship of creation is best understood, according to Francis, from the perspective of poverty. The son of a wealthy textile merchant named Pietro Bernadone, Francis was in his youth a typical member of the emerging commercial class, more devoted to parties than to poverty. But Francis saw that the human drive for possessions

---

<sup>1</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), p.211.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Zimmerman, ‘Why Haldane went to India’ in F. Apffel-Marglin and S. Marglin (eds), *Decolonizing Knowledge: From Development to Dialogue* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p.287, quoting from Haldane’s essay ‘The Unity and Diversity of Life’ (1959).

undermines the relations between persons and nature. The competition for property undermined a radical dependence on God. Francis interpreted quite literally the command of Jesus to his disciples to travel unburdened by a purse or a bag. Instead of shutting himself in a monastery to find God in books and Gregorian chants, Francis advocated the winding path of the *peregrinatio evangelii*, the “gospel pilgrimage” among the poor and the communion with creation.

As we noted last week, an influential modern philosophy in the West suggested that no one possessed land until the earth was “subdued”. From the perspective of St Francis, turning the fruits of the earth into human possessions could only lead away from the radical demands of Christ. Discipleship was primarily a matter of solidarity with those who *lacked* possessions, and this was expressed even in the way Francis dressed – by giving up the fine robes given to him by his family, and adopting the clothing of the poor. The Gospels record that Jesus commanded his disciples to travel without money or a change of clothes, although there is a slight difference between the version in Mark 6 which suggests that sandals would be acceptable, and Luke 10 which has Jesus commanding the disciples *not* to wear sandals. Francis came to adopt the more radical demand not to wear sandals, and he also replaced his leather belt with a cord.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that small variations about how to interpret the life of discipleship can be found already in the early Gospel traditions. The summaries of Jesus’ final mission statements also vary considerably. According to Mark 16, Jesus commands the

---

<sup>3</sup> K.B. Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St Francis of Assisi Reconsidered* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp.16-17.

disciples to “preach the good news to all creation”, and this cosmic scope is expected to be accompanied by signs like the ability of believers to pick up snakes without being harmed (16:15-18). Matthew 28, on the other hand, makes no mention of preaching to creation or handling snakes, speaking instead of making disciples of all nations, including teaching them all the commands of Jesus (28:19-20).

Now if we were all lawyers by trade, we might want to get some clarity about exactly which commands are necessary for discipleship, and whether for example, the wearing of sandals was acceptable or not, or whether St Francis was right to give up his leather belt. The Gospels are not consistent on such details, and some interpretation will always be necessary. But details aside, *all* the Gospels agree that the disciples were instructed by Jesus to travel without money, yet not many preachers (including me) are keen to make this a litmus test of discipleship. In fact, we’re probably more likely to hear the reverse: that lots of money is a sign that God is blessing you.

St Francis tended to be a literalist, even on the most inconvenient teachings of Jesus. If Jesus taught love of enemies, and imagined that enemies might be approached without the use of swords, then that is what St Francis did – even when the rest of the church was engaged in the Crusades. When most of Europe was bent on the conquest of Muslim Jerusalem, St Francis went into Muslim camps to preach the Christ who died in Jerusalem, not the Christ who conquers it. On this point also, St Francis held to an

inconvenient literalism about how to follow Jesus. He went without weapons and without fear to preach to Muslims, and he was eventually received with respect.<sup>4</sup>

St Francis seems to have dealt with some similar issues to those that concern us now: fear of Muslims, environmental crises, and consumerism. Although he lived eight centuries ago, he seems to provide us with a model of discipleship that deals with all of them. I'm not suggesting that he is easily imitated, or that it is realistic for all Christians to adopt his way of life. Some of his recent critics have suggested, for example, that for all his solidarity with the poor, he did not actually engage in community development projects that would have lifted people out of their poverty. In this respect he differs from most aid and development agencies today, including Christian ones.

Some of the friars who followed Francis tried to convince him, at one stage, that they needed to adopt more discipline and order in their spiritual lives, perhaps by taking on the rules of St Benedict or St Bernard. Francis is reported to have said this in response: "My brothers, God called me to walk in the way of humility and showed me the way of simplicity. I do not want to hear any mention of the rule of St Augustine, of St Bernard or of St Benedict. The Lord has told me that he wanted to make a new fool of me in the world, and God does not want to lead us by any other knowledge than that".<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Christine Mallouhi, *Waging Peace on Islam* (London: Monarch, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, p.207.

Despite his foolishness, I want to suggest that St Francis goes to the heart of discipleship. His life provides the kind of model that is set out in Philippians 2:6-7.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is also in Christ Jesus; who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself*, taking on the form of a servant.

It is not that Christ emptied himself of divine qualities, to the extent that the life and teaching of Jesus might bear no relation to God. Rather, this very “emptying” reveals God’s character. The humble human form, as embodied in the life of Jesus, reveals who God is.

As we saw last week, the Creator revealed in Genesis exercises *restraint* so as to allow space for the created order. So also, the incarnation reveals the self-limiting life of God.<sup>6</sup>

Creation, incarnation, and discipleship can all be understood as forms of self-emptying. St Francis interpreted this self-emptying as entailing radical poverty, in obedience to the Jesus who commanded his followers to carry no money with them when they engaged in mission. St Francis also followed Jesus into the spiritual discipline of being with wild animals, and of living out the covenant envisaged by Hosea 2: “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety”. Whether it was talking with the wolf who threatened the city of Gubbio, or the Muslim army who threatened the ideals of Christendom, St Francis

---

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Moltman, “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World” in J. Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp.137-51.



emptied himself in order to make known the character of God. In this way, he followed the Christ of Philippians 2.

So here is the difficult decision that St Francis puts to us today: do we follow Christ so that we can enjoy inner peace and financial blessings, defending our faith with crusaders' mentality, with sword and shield as required. *Or* do we place a greater priority on encountering the Spirit of God in creation, seeking to be peace-makers in the world, foolishly making space even for wild animals and dangerous enemies with only the love of God to defend us?