

ST FRANCIS AND ECOLOGY

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with Martin Palmer*

Of all the saints of the Church, there is probably no better known nor more loved saint than Francis. If you want to think of a saint whose very life and words take us directly into a loving relationship with nature, St Francis immediately springs to mind. When Pope John Paul II declared a patron saint for ecology in 1979, he chose Francis. However, during his lifetime not everyone at Rome was in favour of this excited young man and at one point he was nearly expelled from the Church—in which case, we probably would only know of him as a footnote in history.

The times Francis lived in—the end of the twelfth century, beginning of the thirteenth—were times of tremendous social change. All over Europe, people were leaving the official Church and setting off on their own, or in groups, to try and come closer to Jesus. The Church had grown corrupt and wealthy. The people were suffering from poverty, overpopulation (especially in the areas of modern Belgium and the Netherlands) and the feudal lords were placing heavier and heavier burdens on the people. Power struggles between the Pope and the kings of the newly emerging countries of Europe meant that people's loyalties were split. It was not an easy time to be alive.

To many, the Church had failed. Its wealth and power meant it was part of the problem, not a solution. Its hierarchy of bishops, cardinals, archbishops and priests made both salvation and God seem remote. The Church had come to stress the divinity of Christ rather than his human nature. This made Christ a distant, severe figure. Christianity seemed to have lost its common touch,

its ability to speak directly to people's lives and to their hopes and fears.

In response, new movements emerged. In the north of Europe, the Beguines and the Beghards arose. These were religious communities for women and men, where they lived in simplicity and poverty, sharing all things. While some of these stayed within the Church, others felt that the wealth of the Church meant it was no longer Christian. They attacked the Church and were eventually broken up and destroyed. In the south of France, the Albigenses and Cathars totally rejected the Church (and indeed the material world) and established their own Church. Here they practised very simple lifestyles and their priests lived in great simplicity. But they rejected many of the doctrines of the Church and so were called heretics. Great and very bloody crusades were launched against them and they were eventually brutally crushed.

Out of this upheaval came Francis. Almost single-handed he brought the Church back to the people. His teaching was centred upon the humanity of Christ and on his love and care for all his creation. Francis showed in his own life what it meant to be Christlike. His simplicity of lifestyle reminded people of Jesus. His style of preaching, telling stories about everyday things, recalled the parables of Jesus. His openness to the poor, the sick, the oppressed made him seem like a second Christ, walking again on earth. In fact, Francis is sometimes known as the Second Christ.

Francis was born in Assisi, Italy in 1182. He grew up as a wealthy young man who mixed with the young nobles and squires of the castle. He longed to be a knight and in 1202 he took part in a battle against the old enemy of Assisi, the nearby town of Perugia. The Assisi forces were routed and Francis landed up in the town prison of Perugia. Here he seems to have had time to reflect on what was really important in life. But he still determined to be a knight. Indeed he even got to the stage of setting off, fully armed, to join the Crusader army. But within a few miles of his home, he heard a voice which asked him to serve God by returning to Assisi. Reluctantly, Francis obeyed the voice.

Shortly afterwards, Francis received his call. When he was praying one day in the little church of St Damian, the great painted

crucifix over the altar spoke to him and told him: 'Go, Francis, and repair my house because it is falling into ruin.' Francis, believing that the voice referred to the actual church of St Damian, set about restoring it. Then one day the crucifix spoke again: 'If you want to fulfil my will, Francis, you must scorn and abhor all that which you have desired and loved up to now.'

The effect on Francis was dramatic. He gave up his old ways and left his friends with their passion for wealth, warfare and parties. Instead he sought to love only God and to love everyone and everything he met because he saw God in them. So transformed was Francis that he gave away some of his father's wealth. This led to a furious row in front of the bishop, at the end of which Francis gave his father back all his clothes and turned, quite literally naked, to the Church for protection. From that day on Francis owned nothing but the simple habit he wore.

The poverty which Francis so willingly embraced is the hallmark of his life and of the community of brothers which he founded. He drew his model for his life of poverty from the life of Christ. When, in 1210, Francis submitted his Rule for his community to the Pope, he took as his foundation stone the poor Christ, the Christ who as the Bible says, emptied himself and took on the form of a servant. The human side of Jesus Christ's life filled Francis's mind and he saw, perhaps more clearly than anyone else before him, that Christ has become our Elder Brother, which is why we can call God Father.

In very humble circumstances, Francis and his brothers lived together, caring for the poor and the sick. In particular, the brothers travelled around the area teaching the ordinary people the love of God. In their travels, they often spent nights alone in the woods or on the mountains. This closeness to nature made a deep impression on the spirituality of the early Franciscans. To Francis himself, all nature was a sign of the love and generosity of God.

For Francis, the whole of God's creation was touched by the forgiveness and new life brought by Christ. All creation was special to God in Francis's eyes. But we must not make him into some sort of sentimental naturalist. Francis did indeed love creation, but first of all he learned to love himself by giving up his own self. Francis renounced self, self-will, self-love, self-seeking

in order to give his whole self to Christ and to learn to walk in the path of Christ.

Of all his teachings, it is his ideas, beliefs and language about the rest of creation which mark Francis out from almost all other great saints and teachers of the Church. In many ways, the Church is still catching up with Francis on this question, as we shall see later.

Questions for discussion

- 1 What stories do you know from the life of Francis? Do they focus on his relationship with other people, his relationship with God, or his relationship with the natural world?
- 2 We saw in Chapter 2 (pp. 31–2) that there is not much specific information in the Bible about Jesus' attitude to the natural world. Given Francis's Christ-like life and work, can we take his attitude to the natural world as being an echo of Jesus'? Do Francis's teachings on this point fill the gap left in the gospel accounts?

Francis saw all of creation, the waters, hills and the earth itself as being loved by God and as loving God. This was totally new in the teaching of the Church. It was also considered dangerous by some. The Church in Europe had had to struggle with the older religions of the people. Many of these older religions were what might be called 'nature religions'. They saw the different parts of nature as being spirits and gods and they worshipped them. The Church, in order to preach that there was only one God, who was greater than all creation, had suppressed and destroyed these older religions. This had meant that the Church had sounded as if it did not value the different aspects of nature, the birds, animals, rivers and hills, trees, forest and clouds. God was above all this, taught the Church. But Francis turned this on its head. Having no fear of nature, he praised nature and saw nature praising God, its creator. For him, God was not the stern Father of so much of the Church's teaching. God was the creator Mother who gave birth to all and who cared, lovingly, for all. So when he called the Earth, Mother Earth, he saw her as being a part of God. When he spoke of the

birds and animals as being his brothers and sisters, he meant that they were part of the same great family under God.

In his travels, Francis showed this feeling of family for the whole of nature by his attitude to such creatures as the birds. One famous story tells of his return, exhausted, from an expedition to Egypt. He had gone hoping to preach to the Crusaders and then to the Muslims. He had failed and had been disillusioned by what he saw of the Crusaders' behaviour. On landing in Italy again he was overcome by the birdsong. 'Listen', he said, 'to our brother birds who are praising the Lord; let us go among them and sing our



Francis and the birds. From a manuscript in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

morning service.' So saying he led the way, rejoicing in the pure simplicity of the birds' song to God. However, having joined the birds, the brothers found their own songs of praise were being drowned by the noise of the birds. So Francis spoke to the birds—as one member of a family to another. 'Brother birds, refrain from singing until we are finished with our prayers.' This the birds did until the brothers had finished their prayers.

For Francis, the coming of Jesus Christ to live amongst us was not just an event of importance for human beings. It was an event of importance for all life. Francis saw that because God loved the world, all that he had created, he gave us his greatest gift, Jesus Christ. This is not some distant God who cares nothing for the world. Here is a God who walked the earth, a God who shared the joys and sorrows, the hardships and trials of those whom he came to save. Now the world was different from what it had been before and it would never be quite the same again, for God has passed through it and left it the better for his passing.

One of the most famous stories of Francis concerns the wolf of Gubbio. The town of Gubbio was a place which Francis often liked to visit. But for some time now, its citizens had been terrified of leaving the city at night or alone for fear of a large ferocious wolf. The wolf attacked anyone who came by. Francis learnt of this and set off to find out what was wrong—just as a brother might go to see his brother who had gone astray. When the wolf sprang out to attack Francis, Francis spoke to him sternly and the wolf became meek and mild. It was obvious that the wolf was hungry and could not catch his normal prey. So Francis told the wolf off for acting in such an unChristian way as to attack people. He asked the wolf to show he would never attack people again. Then Francis talked to the townspeople of Gubbio. He explained the needs of the wolf and made the townspeople promise to feed the wolf and never to harm him. This, reluctantly, they did. Then Francis brought the wolf to Gubbio. Here the wolf lived happily for many years, much loved by the townspeople. When the wolf died they buried him with great ceremony and raised a statue to him. In this sort of way did Francis show the transforming power of Christ to lives both human and animal. For Francis, there was really no difference between human beings and animals—all were

part of God's family. In actions such as the wolf of Gubbio, Francis saw a re-establishing of the right relationship between humans and the rest of creation, a restoration of the harmony which is the original vision of the book of Genesis.

There are two key points about Francis's love of nature. Seeing what wonders God has done for us by creating life, we should realize that we have repaid God with sin and evil. So Francis believed that we must do penance for our sins to show God that we are truly sorry for our ingratitude. This should be seen as our 'thank you' to God for all that God has done for us. Secondly, Francis saw all creatures as his brothers and sisters. This was because if Jesus could become our brother, then surely we were able to see all other creatures in the same way. Francis called those who joined him in his life of poverty, Friars—which means brothers. In using this term he showed that Christ has set the example of brotherhood, and that we humans must learn to extend this to all creation.

The greatest expression of his vision is his famous Canticle of the Creatures.

Good Lord, most high Almighty,
To you all praise is due,
All glory, honour, blessing,
Belong alone to you;
There is no person whose lips
Are fit to frame your name.

Be praised then, my Lord God,
In and through all your creatures,
Especially among them,
Through your Noble Brother Sun,
By whom you light our day;
In his radiant splendid beauty
He reminds us, Lord, of you.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and all the stars;
You have made the sky shine in their lovely light.

In Brother Wind be praised, my Lord,
And in the air,
In clouds, in calm,
In all the weather moods that cherish life.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water,
She is most useful, humble, precious, pure.

And Brother Fire, by whom you lighten night;
How fine is he, how happy, powerful, strong.

Through our dear Mother Earth be praised, my Lord,
She feeds us, guides us, gives us plants, bright flowers,
And all her fruits.

Be praised, my Lord, through humanity
When out of love for you
We pardon one another.

When we endure

In sickness and in sorrow

Blessed are they who persevere in peace;

From you, Most High, they will receive their prize.

Be praised, my Lord, praised for our Sister Death,
From whom no one alive can hope to hide;
Wretched are they who die deep in their sin.
And blessed those Death finds doing your will.
For them there is no further death to fear.

O People! praise God and bless him,
Give him thanks
And serve him very humbly.

(Slightly adapted from translation by Molly Riedy)

Questions for discussion

- 1 How difficult do you find it to think of inanimate creation—fire, water, trees etc.—praising God?
- 2 Take one example of inanimate creation, and make a hymn of praise that it might sing to God.
- 3 Is there any danger that Francis's attitude might lead one to worship nature itself?

Francis died a painful death (hence the verse about Sister Death in the Canticle) in 1226. It is said that at the moment he died, a flock of skylarks rose from the roof to accompany the soul of this great

saint to heaven. He died in poverty, clad only in coarse cloth and in humble surroundings. He left an Order which then had to try and live without his shining example.

So what happened to the powerful vision of Francis, of our family relationship with all creation? If truth be told, it was almost immediately forgotten, or romanticized into a slightly soppy version of Francis who chatted to birds. The conventional understanding of nature as being below us returned and swallowed Francis's more challenging and more beautiful vision.

The Franciscan movement, established by Francis, soon relegated most of his teachings about creation to the back of its mind. Only a few Franciscans realized that Francis had opened up the possibility of seeing and relating to nature in a new way. The two best-known such people were Duns Scotus and Roger Bacon. They both lived in the thirteenth century and many have seen them as having laid the foundation stones of later Western scientific discoveries in their approach to learning and to nature. Essentially, these two men took Francis's vision of God's love being visible in all of creation, and began to look anew at creation. They looked, as a lover might look upon something which belonged to his beloved. They studied nature because it was of God. From their studies come the earliest attempts at understanding how nature worked—the basis of modern science. Yet these two men did this from love, not from some cool rational desire to take nature apart. It is a cruel irony that the reductionist approach to nature, which is more interested in the parts than in the way all parts interrelate, should have sprung from the work of these two men. Nothing could be further away from the holistic vision and understanding of St Francis.

Sadly, with the exception of these two men, Bacon and Duns Scotus, the rest of the Franciscan Orders ignored this aspect of Francis's teachings until very recently.

In the mid-1960s, after the great Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, all the religious Orders were told to go back to their original founders and their teachings. As the Franciscans did this, they rediscovered the teachings of Francis about nature. In the years since then, Franciscans have been in the forefront of attempts to care for nature. The sad reflection is that if

they had not lost this vision for so long, perhaps we would not be in quite such a terrible state today. However that may be, we can now thank God that Francis's vision has been rediscovered—maybe just in time.

Questions for discussion

- 1 Do you think that science and Francis's ideas can work together?
- 2 In what ways might scientific study be different today if Francis's ideas had remained well-known and popular?
- 3 What problems can you see in living life according to Francis's vision?