

## St Francis of Assisi notes

### A Potted History

His story is well known and oft told:

- The son of a wealthy Italian clothing merchant in the late 12<sup>th</sup> Century (1182), his real name was Giovanni, or John. Yet his love of French writing and culture got him the nickname Francis early in life.
- In his early 20's he aspired to be a knight in shining armour in the continuing war between Assisi and Perugia in Umbria Italy. No doubt his father encouraged this pursuit as a billboard to his business
- But like so many of Francis' pursuits, his military service was short-lived. In fact, before he even saw action, he noticed a nobleman in the troop without suitable armour, and such was Francis's spirit, he sacrificed his own and gave his armour to the man. Sure enough, Francis was captured and imprisoned by the enemy later that day.
- Some-time after his experiences as a prisoner of war, Francis contracted and survived a life-threatening illness
- His spiritual life and devotion to God manifest itself in recurring dreams and visions. These, along with key texts from the bible and sermons that caught his attention led him to look to the needs of outcasts as a way of following Jesus
- He renounced the security that his privileged life had given him.
- He became widely known for his service to the downtrodden, and to a life of prayer. His piety and passion was attractive to a small band of followers who were later officially recognised as an order of the Catholic Church – the so-called “Little Brothers”.
- The first rule of this household was “to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience without anything of our own and in chastity”.
- He died on 4 October 1226.

Francis was greatly influenced by key texts in the Gospels, including ‘Strive or seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and these [material things] will be given to you as well’. He was also affected by a particular sermon he heard from Matthew 10 – (when he was in his late 20's) – calling the listeners to preach the Kingdom of heaven and to bring healing and wholeness to the marginalised and oppressed – with no thought of care or comfort for self, Francis' world view was changed.

One day, in the church of San Damiano, outside of Assisi, he seemed to hear Christ saying to him, “Francis, repair my falling house”. Yet, at the time, Francis took the words literally. He robbed his father of expensive supplies and paid for repairs to be made to the San Damiano church building. His father was outraged and there was a public confrontation at which his father disinherited and disowned him, and he in turn renounced his father's wealth.

In a scene made famous in movies, Francis not only handed his father his purse, but also took off his expensive clothes, laid them at his father's feet, and walked away naked. He declared himself "wedded to Lady Poverty", renounced all material possessions and devoted himself to serving the poor.

In his day the most dreaded of all diseases was something known as leprosy. It is probably not the same as either the modern or the Biblical disease of that name. Lepers were kept at a distance and regarded with fear and disgust. Francis cared for them, fed them, bathed their sores and kissed them.

Since he could not pay for repairs to the Church of San Damiano, he undertook to repair it by his own labours. He moved in with the priest and begged stones lying useless in fields, shaping them for use in repairing the church. He got his meals, not by asking for money so that he might live at the expense of others, but by scrounging crusts and discarded vegetable from trash-bins and by working as a day labourer, insisting on being paid in bread, milk, eggs, or vegetables rather than in money. Soon a few companions joined him.

Dante in his Paradiso has Saint Aquinas say of him:

"Let me tell you of a youth whose aristocratic father disowned Him because of his love for a beautiful lady. She had been married before, to Christ, and was so faithful a spouse to Him that, while Mary only stood at the foot of the Cross, she leaped up to be with Him on the Cross. These two of whom I speak are Francis and the Lady Poverty. As they walked along together, the sight of their mutual love drew men's hearts after them. Bernard saw them and ran after them, kicking off his shoes to run faster to so great a peace. Giles and Sylvester saw them, kicked off their shoes and ran to join them ..."  
After three years, in 1210, the Pope authorized the forming of the Order of Friars Minor, commonly called the Franciscans. "Friar" means "brother" as in "fraternity", and "minor" means "lesser" or "younger". These titles could be taken to mean that to be that a Franciscan, upon meeting another Christian, is to believe "I am your brother in Christ, and your younger brother at that, bound to defer to you and to give you precedence over myself".

Francis and his companions took literally the words of Christ when he sent his disciples out to preach recorded in Matthew chapter 10:

"Preach as you go, saying, "The kingdom of Heaven is at hand." ... You have received the Gospel without payment, give it to others as freely. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, no spare garment nor sandals, nor staff.

They would have no money, and no property, individually or collectively. Their task was to preach, "using words if necessary", but declaring by word and action the love of God in Christ.

It has been suggested that he it was who set up the first Christmas manger scene, to bring home to human hearts and imaginations as well as to their intellects the Good News of God made human for our salvation.

In 1219, Francis went to the Holy Land to preach to the Muslims. He was given a pass through the enemy lines, and spoke to the Sultan, Melek-al-Kamil. Francis proclaimed the Gospel to the Sultan, who replied that he had his own beliefs, and that Muslims were as firmly convinced of the truth of Islam as Francis was of the truth of Christianity. Francis proposed that a fire be built, and that he and a Muslim volunteer would walk side by side into the fire to show whose faith was stronger. The Sultan said he was not sure that a Muslim volunteer could be found. Francis then offered to walk into the fire alone. The Sultan who was deeply impressed but remained unconverted. Francis proposed an armistice between the two warring sides, and drew up terms for one; the Sultan agreed, but, to Francis's deep disappointment, the Christian leaders would not. Francis returned to Italy, but a permanent result was that the Franciscans were given custody of the Christian shrines then in Muslim hands and animosity between Christians and Muslims remains strong today.

From the first known letter from Francis to all Christians:

"O how happy and blessed are those who love the Lord and do as The Lord himself said in the gospel: You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul, and your neighbour as yourself. Therefore, let us love God and adore him with pure heart and mind. This is his particular desire when he says: True worshipers adore the Father in spirit and truth. For all who adore him must do so in the spirit of truth. Let us also direct to him our praises and prayers, saying: "Our Father, who are in heaven", since we must always pray and never grow slack.

Furthermore, let us produce worthy fruits of penance. Let us also love our neighbours as ourselves. Let us have charity and humility. Let us give alms because these cleanse our souls from the stains of sin. Men lose all the material things they leave behind in this world, but they carry with them the reward of their charity and the alms they give. For these they will receive from the Lord the reward and recompense they deserve. We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh. Rather we must be simple, humble and pure. We should never desire to be over others. Instead, we ought to be servants who are submissive to every human being for God's sake. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on all who live in this way and persevere in it to the end. He will permanently dwell in them. They will be the Father's children who do his work. They are the spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Remember the words from Matthew's Gospel this morning;

"But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

young noblewoman, Ciara Offredicio – Claire of Assisi.

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century Francis' ministry also included irenic dialogue with the Muslim world – both in the Holy Land, where significant concessions seemed to have been granted his followers by the Sultan, Ayyubid Al-Kamil – and in Egypt. Francis is reported to have visited the Sultan in 1219 (the period of the fifth Crusade) during the great siege of the Egyptian port of Damietta – where, with the Sultan's permission he preached to the Saracens (the Muslims) and enjoyed the Sultan's gracious hospitality; remarkable given that 35,000 soldiers (Crusaders) were at his 'gates', ready to launch their next sortie.

### Notes from Robertson

When he returned to Assisi after his incarceration, people commented that he looked like a changed man; a shadow of his former self.

A key set piece scene in our blockbuster about The Radical would have to be the center square in Assisi. Young Giovanni Bernadone was standing before Bishop Guido who read his public sentence for domestic crimes before many nosy citizens. He was required to pay back all he owed to his father. Yet, instead, the young man shed all his possessions there and then, stripped himself of his clothes, changed his name, and walked away to start an altogether new life.

When meditating before the large cross of Christ in the sanctuary of Santo Damiano Church, outside the walls of Assisi, he believed Jesus spoke to him, saying "Repair my church." Francis took this literally and began repairing this building, and other church buildings as his calling by Christ demanded. To his surprise, a number of men followed his lead and joined him in the work. Soon there was a small band looking to Francis for leadership.

Francis' impact was both counterculture and provocative to both Church and State:

1. He **formed a movement not a monastery** - As many began to join his movement, he **did not form a monastery** or order like the Augustinians or Benedictines. For Francis, there would be **no**

**hierarchy** – no abbot would be appointed. Each would be brothers of equal standing before God.

2. Secondly, he set **counterculture rules** for life. His followers were invited to make a vow to obedience, chastity and **poverty**; the third of which became a hallmark of the Franciscan way. The “little brothers” as we now know them, or “friars minor” pledged themselves to what Francis called “Lady Poverty”.
3. Thirdly, for all his work restoring church buildings that the Church authorities left to rot and ruin, Francis **did not draw a wage or seek financial support**. Instead, Francis undertook to repair it by his own labours. He moved in with the priest and searched out stones lying useless in fields, shaping them for use in repairing the church. He got his meals, not by asking for money so that he might live at the expense of others, but by scrounging crusts and discarded vegetable from trash-bins and by working as a day labourer, insisting on being paid in bread, milk, eggs, or vegetables rather than in money.

Dante in his Paradiso has Saint Aquinas say of him:

“Let me tell you of a youth whose aristocratic father disowned Him because of his love for a beautiful lady. She had been married before, to Christ, and was so faithful a spouse to Him that, while Mary only stood at the foot of the Cross, she leaped up to be with Him on the Cross. These two of whom I speak are Francis and the Lady Poverty. As they walked along together, the sight of their mutual love drew men’s hearts after them. Bernard saw them and ran after them, kicking off his shoes to run faster to so great a peace. Giles and Sylvester saw them, kicked off their shoes and ran to join them ...”

When asked by the Bishop of Assisi about the difficulty of life devoid of any possessions, Francis responded, "If we possessed property, Your Grace, we would need arms to defend it." Francis had discovered the truth that elude, and still eludes, the vast majority: we do not possess things, they possess us.

Francis truly considered himself to be free: free to love God, free to reach out to others, and free to live like the birds.

From the first known letter from Francis to all Christians:

"O how happy and blessed are those who love the Lord and do as The Lord himself said in the gospel: You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul, and your neighbour as yourself. Therefore, let us love God and adore him with pure heart and mind. This is his particular desire when he says: True worshipers adore the Father in spirit and truth. For all who adore him must do so in the spirit of truth. Let us also direct to him our praises and prayers, saying: "Our Father, who are in heaven", since we must always pray and never grow slack.

Furthermore, let us produce worthy fruits of penance. Let us also love our neighbours as ourselves. Let us have charity and humility. Let us give alms because these cleanse our souls from the stains of sin. Men lose all the material things they leave behind in this world, but they carry with them the reward of their charity and the alms they give. For these they will receive from the Lord the reward and recompense they deserve. We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh. Rather we must be simple, humble and pure. We should never desire to be over others. Instead, we ought to be servants who are submissive to every human being for God's sake. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on all who live in this way and persevere in it to the end. He will permanently dwell in them. They will be the Father's children who do his work. They are the spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Remember the words from Matthew's Gospel this morning;

"But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

## Conclusion draft

So what are we to make of this famous saint? He has been called "the Other Jesus" by some. This is an interesting reflection for us to consider. The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel in chapters 5 and 6 is the root of Francis's radical living. No one says of the Church of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, "Oh Jesus was just like those bishops and their lavish lifestyles, and their grand church sanctuaries." But some do say this of Francis.

His likeness to Jesus is a challenge to the Jesus we like to imagine as we pray; the Jesus we might tell others about if they were to ask, "Tell me about the Jesus you follow".

Quote Matthew 5 and 6 here

Franco Zeffirelli's film about Francis, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* finished on a happy note as all movies about Francis seem to do. But our blockbuster in "God Justice League" would be honest, the next wave of custodians of his movement frustrated Francis as they, step by step left behind the original fundamental ways of life he modelled and opted for more comfortable lodging, more hierarchical structures and more complicated rules for life.

Francis was not happy with humanity as "sister death" approached.

History likes us to remember him as the patron saint of animals, a friend of the birds. History likes us to be challenged by his holistic regard for creation and call him a patron of the ecology of our planet.

Yet, fundamentally, the one known as the "other Jesus" reminds us that the Gospel is a dangerous message for many – The Jesus of the Bible causes people to break through social, economic, political and religious barriers.

He is revered and loved universally, by Christians and non- Christians alike. And yet, he didn't seem to Get it Right.

Perhaps this is what Jesus is talking about when he suggests that the foolish and unlearned may know something that the wise and learned don't know.

Perhaps certainty and Being Right are not what Jesus wants from our lives.

Maybe Saint Francis shows us something completely different, something that looks more like perseverance in the face of uncertainty.

Francis was also famous for his bodily austerities. He would throw ashes into his beans so that he couldn't enjoy them too much. He called his Body "Brother Ass" and was known to roll naked in thorns and snow to discipline his body. As he lay dying (while still a young man), he may have had an understanding that, again, he'd been foolish and hadn't Got it Right. He asked "Brother Ass" to forgive him, and perhaps realized that he'd squandered one of God's gifts by not being kinder to himself.

## Episcopal sermon

He may be seen in gardens around the world. He is enshrined on bird baths and bird feeders. The prayer that we associate with him, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace," is arguably one of the most popular prayers circulated. He is the patron saint of animal lovers, peace-makers, and ecologists. He is associated with cardinal works of mercy to the poor and marginalized.

But these are not the aspects of Saint Francis that I want to speak about today. So often, I think, I have a tendency to view the saints as persons who were superheroes; who were capable of gritting their teeth and doing the Right Thing in the face of total adversity. As such, I find them to be totally unlike me. My problem seems to be not so much that I can't do the Right Thing, but that more often than not, I'm not certain what the Right Thing is!

In this Global Village we live in today, we are assaulted by conflicting values and oppositional demands. The necessity of doing the Right Thing is constantly upon us, even in the simple demands of day to day living: regular or low-fat, recycle or not recycle, welfare or no welfare. Although this might seem simply to require a certain fluidity on my part-- a refraining from deciding, as it were--in actuality I must eventually make a decision. And when I do, how can I know I'm Right?

So the aspect of Saint Francis that speaks to me most strongly today is this: he was a man who Didn't Get It Right! Throughout the course of his life he steadfastly refused to join the ranks of the wise and learned--of those, who were certain of the Right Thing. He remained a fool for God, and as such, was always open to rethinking the Holy Spirit's inspiration. I'd like to tell some stories that illustrate my point.

When Francis was a very young man--that is, before he really had any inkling of the vocation God had in store for him--he thought he might like very much to be a knight. In fact, we have in the records a dream that Francis had about this time: He is in a large room full of knights' armor and the trappings of

chivalry. And Jesus is there with him. Jesus says to Francis, "Francis, I want you to be my knight."

There is evidence that this somewhat idealistic endeavor was fueled by the popular literature of the day in which knights in shining armor vanquished dragons, rescued fair maidens, and generally did the Right Thing for the sake of good. He conveyed this hope to his father, who was a prosperous cloth merchant in Assisi, and I imagine that his father found this to be a very pleasing scheme. At the time Assisi was engaged in one of its many wars with the neighboring city of Perugia, and for a middle-class merchant to have his son fighting for the city outfitted as if he were a lord, would have had some appeal to Francis' father. So he brought him the armor, swords, lances, gowns and horse that would be required.

But Francis was already who he was and when the day came to ride off to Perugia, he noticed that among the company there was an impoverished nobleman who had no armor, horse, etc. So Francis give his entire outfit away, and marched off to Perugia unarmed.

Needless to say, the encounter proved disastrous for Francis, and he was captured and imprisoned. When he was finally ransomed, he was ill with a high fever. If Jesus had wanted him to be a knight, Francis reasoned, something was clearly going wrong. Perhaps, like a fool, he had gotten the message wrong. He continued to search. What could it mean to be Jesus' knightly champion?

Later in his life, after he had renounced his family, and gone off to live the life of a hermit, he had one of the more remarkable experiences in what was to be a most remarkable life. While praying one day before the crucifix in the ruined church of San Damiano, the figure of Jesus came to life and spoke to him saying, "Francis, rebuild my church, which, as you see, is falling down." Francis looked around him and saw that, indeed, the church of San Damiano was falling down. He immediately began putting stone on stone, rebuilding the church. The people of Assisi thought he was a fool. Slowly, again, he began to

understand that he'd gotten it wrong. It wasn't until much later in his life that he understood that Jesus had meant for Francis to rebuild his Church, with a capital "C".

And when he understood that, perhaps he also began to understand what it might be to be Jesus' knightly champion.

Francis was also famous for his bodily austerities. He would throw ashes into his beans so that he couldn't enjoy them too much. He called his Body "Brother Ass" and was known to roll naked in thorns and snow to discipline his body. As he lay dying (while still a young man), he may have had an understanding that, again, he'd been foolish and hadn't Got it Right. He asked "Brother Ass" to forgive him, and perhaps realized that he'd squandered one of God's gifts by not being kinder to himself.

So what are we to make of this famous saint? He has been called "the Other Jesus" by some. He is revered and loved universally, by Christians and non-Christians alike. And yet, he didn't seem to Get it Right.

Perhaps this is what Jesus is talking about when he suggests that the foolish and unlearned may know something that the wise and learned don't know. Perhaps certainty and Being Right are not what Jesus wants from our lives. Maybe Saint Francis shows us something completely different, something that looks more like perseverance in the face of uncertainty. Maybe the lesson I can learn from Saint Francis is the lesson that faithfulness is more valuable than Being Right; that humility and unknowing are a more appropriate response to God than certainty and knowledge. Perhaps abandoning the pride of self may be the way to begin to understand God. Or, in the words of Saint Francis' famous prayer, that it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

### Academic sermon

His story is well known and oft told: The son of a wealthy Italian merchant, he experienced – what I would describe as a 'progressive conversion to Christ' informed and influenced by his time as a prisoner of war at around age 20 (in 1201); a life threatening illness three years later, recurring dreams and visions that led him to

engage with lepers and the dispossessed, and the eventual renunciation of the security that his privileged life had afforded.

Passages like our gospel reading with its injunction, 'Strive or seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and these [material things] will be given to you as well' and a sermon he heard from Matthew 10 – (when he was in his late 20's) – enjoining listeners to preach the Kingdom of heaven and to bring healing and wholeness to the marginalised and oppressed – with no thought of care or comfort for self, changed his world view.

Francis eschewed things material and embraced a life of peripatetic preaching, ministry to the downtrodden, and prayer. His piety and passion attracted a small band of followers including the young noblewoman, Ciara Offredicio – Claire of Assisi.

In 1210 Francis received papal sanction and endorsement for the inauguration of a new ministry Order whose first rule called for the household "to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience without anything of our own and in chastity".

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century Francis' ministry also included irenic dialogue with the Muslim world – both in the Holy Land, where significant concessions seemed to have been granted his followers by the Sultan, Ayyubid Al-Kamil – and in Egypt.

Francis is reported to have visited the Sultan in 1219 (the period of the fifth Crusade) during the great siege of the Egyptian port of Damietta – where, with the Sultan's permission he preached to the Saracens (the Muslims) and enjoyed the Sultans gracious hospitality; remarkable given that 35,000 soldiers (Crusaders) were at his 'gates', ready to launch their next sortie.

I have formed the view that Francis, following St Peter's injunction, endeavored to rid himself 'of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy and slander'; for he had indeed 'tasted that the Lord is good'.

Indeed, lore would suggest that through Francis' witness, the Sultan turned to Christ and was baptised just prior to his death, twenty years later.

Either way, as we engage with our neighbours, colleagues and those in our purview – from the Islamic community, I trust that with St Francis, our conversation and demeanor and will be irenic, selfless and gracious; a spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. I Peter 2:5.

Writing this week to his congregation in Roseville (and picked up the ABC's 'the Drum' website) Dr John Dickson stated:

In the end, I have a simple thing to say, and I feel a strong sense of God's pleasure in saying it. Common sense and Christian faith urge us to shun both a *naïve recasting* of Islam as the mirror-image of liberal democracy, and a *hateful projection* of our own tribalism onto Australian Muslims.

Instead, let's go out of our way in the coming weeks and months to pray for the Muslims around us and to convey love and friendship toward them. I commit to pray for every Muslim I see, and when I meet Muslims personally, I will try to express friendship in Christ's name.

I gave it a go last week at Adelaide airport. I greeted a Muslim family, conveyed my fear that recent media coverage might make them feel under the microscope, and expressed my sincere welcome and friendship. They were taken aback, but the woman held her hand to her heart and said, "Thank you. That means so much to me!" The look on her face almost made me cry.

Francis also seemed to have very clear understanding of his role as vicegerent; as the Lord placed men and women in his garden *as those through whom his dominion and authority over the created order would be exercised* (the vicegerency of Genesis 2), so Francis understood his role as a steward of God's world.

His 19<sup>th</sup> century biographer, Bonaventure, observes that Francis preached that the world was created good and beautiful by God but suffers a need for redemption because of the primordial sin of men and women. He preached to man and beast the universal ability and duty of all creatures to praise God [as per Psalm 148] and the duty of men and women to protect and enjoy nature as both the stewards of God's creation and as creatures ourselves.

During the World Environment Day 1982, Pope John Paul II said that Francis' love and care for creation was a challenge for contemporary Christians and a reminder "not to behave like dissident predators where nature is concerned, but to assume responsibility for it, taking all care so that everything stays healthy and integrated, so as to offer a welcoming and friendly environment even to those who succeed us."

He also said on the occasion of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, that Francis "offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation".

He went on to make the point that: "As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Francis invited all of creation – animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon – to give honor and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples." And Francis was never sentimental when it came to an understanding of that peace with God; he knew that it was through Christ's rejection by mortals (as we read in I Peter) his death for our sin that we are reconciled to God. In his adoration prayer he writes,

We adore You,  
 Lord Jesus Christ,  
 in all Your churches  
 throughout the world  
 and we bless You  
 because

by Your holy cross  
You have  
redeemed the world.

My prayer, my hope for the people in the diocese where I serve, following Pope John Paul II, is that when we are at peace with God, we *are* better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples.

Or as St. Peter puts it, 'having tasted that the Lord is good and trustworthy – we'll grow up into our salvation'; a life set apart for the advance of the Kingdom of God – his reign, his dominion, his glory, his honour.

To this end, I'd like to close with St. Francis' Prayer at San Damiano:

Most High, glorious God,  
Enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith;  
certain hope and perfect charity; sense and knowledge, Lord,  
That I may carry out  
Your holy and true commands. Amen.

## Better academic sermon

"All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and let us sing Alleluya, Alleluya! Thou burning sun with golden beam, Thou silvers moon with softer gleam: O praise him, O praise him, Alleluya, Alleluya, Alleluya!"

"Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred let me bring your love; where there is injury your pardon, Lord; and where there is doubt true faith in you."

"Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words."

"If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men."

"While you are preaching peace with your lips, be careful to have it even more fully in your heart."

These are words ascribed to Saint Francis of Assisi, whose life and contribution we remember today. The first few lines are from the first and second hymn this morning. Francis is especially remembered for his commitment to the Gospel and God's providence, to peace and to driving a proper understanding of the beauty and value of God's creation. This morning's readings dwell upon some of the concepts that may have influenced his theology. The accounts of creation found in Genesis are placed at the beginning of the Bible even before the accounts of Israel coming into being. Such a placing in the Bible shows the universal activity of God. God's creative activity not only brought the world into being but also engaged in the lives of individuals and peoples long before Israel came into being. God was at work creating before Israel understood what this activity was all about.

God's actions in the world are of more importance than what humans understand that God has done. Israel eventually catches up with what God has long been about. How humanity understands God's action in the world comes after God has acted.

Human beings in all times and places have experienced, even if they have not known it, God's creative acts before and alongside God's saving acts. We receive our lives and all our natural gifts from God apart from our knowledge of God. God's salvation takes place within the world and within individual lives, which have been brought into being and sustained by God's care.

The placing of Genesis at the beginning of the Bible demonstrates that God's purpose in redemption does not finally centre on Israel. God as Creator has a purpose that spans the world. God's salvation shown by and offered through Jesus is universal.

The reading from Matthew concerns how then we creatures of the Creator are to live. The instruction "do not be anxious" is not only directed to rich people; those inclined to the self-satisfaction and arrogance because of their wealth. Poor people can idolise what they do not have and become anxious. Jesus contrasts the life of a believer with that of the non-believers. His challenge to trust in God's providence does not exclude working and having property. The words are directed to people who were involved with sowing, reaping, storing in barns, toiling and spinning, but who are called to see that their life is not based upon such things. Such people are called to see that their life is not based upon these things. Such persons are not called upon to become birds or lilies, but to consider God's providence for all creation, including birds, lilies and human beings.

Francis was born in 1182, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. He died on 4 October 1226. His early years were frivolous, but an experience of sickness and another of military service were instrumental in leading him to reflect on the purpose of life. One day, in the church of San Damiano, outside of Assisi, he seemed to hear Christ saying to him, "Francis, repair my falling house". He took the words literally, and sold a bale of silk from his father's warehouse to pay for repairs to the church of San Damiano. His father was outraged and there was a public confrontation at which his father disinherited and disowned him, and he in turn renounced his father's wealth. One account says that he not only handed his father his purse, but also took off his expensive clothes, laid them at his father's feet, and walked away naked. He declared himself "wedded to Lady Poverty", renounced all material possessions and devoted himself to serving the poor.

In his day the most dreaded of all diseases was something known as leprosy. It is probably not the same as either the modern or the Biblical disease of that name. Lepers were kept at a distance and regarded with fear and

disgust. Francis cared for them, fed them, bathed their sores and kissed them. Since he could not pay for repairs to the Church of San Damiano, he undertook to repair it by his own labours. He moved in with the priest and begged stones lying useless in fields, shaping them for use in repairing the church. He got his meals, not by asking for money so that he might live at the expense of others, but by scrounging crusts and discarded vegetable from trash-bins and by working as a day labourer, insisting on being paid in bread, milk, eggs, or vegetables rather than in money. Soon a few companions joined him.

Dante in his *Paradiso* has Saint Aquinas say of him:

“Let me tell you of a youth whose aristocratic father disowned Him because of his love for a beautiful lady. She had been married before, to Christ, and was so faithful a spouse to Him that, while Mary only stood at the foot of the Cross, she leaped up to be with Him on the Cross. These two of whom I speak are Francis and the Lady Poverty. As they walked along together, the sight of their mutual love drew men’s hearts after them. Bernard saw them and ran after them, kicking off his shoes to run faster to so great a peace. Giles and Sylvester saw them, kicked off their shoes and ran to join them ...”

After three years, in 1210, the Pope authorized the forming of the Order of Friars Minor, commonly called the Franciscans. “Friar” means “brother” as in “fraternity”, and “minor” means “lesser” or “younger”. These titles could be taken to mean that to be that a Franciscan, upon meeting another Christian, is to believe “I am your brother in Christ, and your younger brother at that, bound to defer to you and to give you precedence over myself”.

Francis and his companions took literally the words of Christ when he sent his disciples out to preach recorded in Matthew chapter 10:

“Preach as you go, saying, “The kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” ... You have received the Gospel without payment, give it to others as freely. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, no spare garment nor sandals, nor staff.

They would have no money, and no property, individually or collectively. Their task was to preach, “using words if necessary”, but declaring by word and action the love of God in Christ. It has been suggested that he it was who set up the first Christmas manger scene, to bring home to human hearts and imaginations as well as to their intellects the Good News of God made human for our salvation.

In 1219, Francis went to the Holy Land to preach to the Muslims. He was given a pass through the enemy lines, and spoke to the Sultan, Melek-al-Kamil. Francis proclaimed the Gospel to the Sultan, who replied that he had his own beliefs, and that Muslims were as firmly convinced of the truth of Islam as Francis was of the truth of Christianity. Francis proposed that a fire be built, and that he and a Muslim volunteer would walk side by side into the fire to show whose faith was stronger. The Sultan said he was not sure that a Muslim volunteer could be found. Francis then offered to walk into the fire alone. The Sultan who was deeply impressed but remained unconverted. Francis proposed an armistice between the two warring sides, and drew up terms for one; the Sultan agreed, but, to Francis’s deep disappointment, the Christian leaders would not. Francis returned to Italy, but a permanent result was that the Franciscans were given custody of the Christian shrines then in Muslim hands and animosity between Christians and Muslims remains strong today.

From the first known letter from Francis to all Christians:

“O how happy and blessed are those who love the Lord and do as The Lord himself said in the gospel: You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul, and your neighbour as yourself. Therefore, let us love God and adore him with pure heart and mind. This is his particular desire when he says: True worshipers adore the Father in spirit and truth. For all who adore him must do so in the spirit of truth. Let us also direct to him our praises and prayers, saying: “Our Father, who are in heaven”, since we must always pray and never grow slack.

Furthermore, let us produce worthy fruits of penance. Let us also love our neighbours as ourselves. Let us have charity and humility. Let us give alms because these cleanse our souls from the stains of sin. Men lose all the material things they leave behind in this world, but they carry with them the reward of their charity and the alms they give. For these they will receive from the Lord the reward and recompense they deserve. We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh. Rather we must be simple, humble and pure. We should never desire to be over others. Instead, we ought to be servants who are submissive to every human being for God’s sake. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on all who live in this way and persevere in it to the end. He will permanently dwell in them. They will be the Father’s children who do his work. They are the spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Remember the words from Matthew’s Gospel this morning;

“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”