

Dependant Gratitude and Interconnectedness – Franciscan Wisdom for a Global Future
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St Francis of Assisi is perhaps the world's most well-known and best-loved saint. The rich young man who gave away all his possessions (and some of his father's too!) to go and live among lepers, the nature mystic who preached to the birds, the peace-maker who travelled to Muslim lands to try and convert the Sultan of Egypt, the contemplative who, towards the end of his life, received in his body the stigmata, the marks of Christ's Passion – all this and more puts Francis among the Top Ten of saints; even school children know about him. But there's a danger in popularity; Francis' story is easy to sentimentalize; plastic statues with doves abound and his romantic appeal can make him a kind of ideal 'true Christian' on behalf of the rest of us... 'if only everyone was like St Francis' etc.

In fact I believe that Francis has something more important to offer us than surrogate sanctity, something that is particularly significant and even essential at this point in history when the world is facing a future precariously balanced between hope and disaster. Through the small collection of his own writings and through the chronicles of his life written by others, and also through the writings of those who were influenced by him, most especially the medieval theologians St Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus, who developed a Franciscan tradition of theology and spirituality, Francis offers us a way of seeing the world that is different from our own. It's a way which, on the one hand, is critical, even subversive, of much in our western contemporary culture, and yet at the same time it's emphatically world-affirming rather than world denying. It's this different way of seeing which I believe can offer wisdom for a global future and which I want to share with you in this lecture. I'm not suggesting that this will be exclusively 'franciscan'; it will resonate, I hope, with other traditions and disciplines, with poets, artists, theologians, environmentalists and people of different faiths, perhaps particularly with those who have spoken before me in this series of lectures.

An economy of gift

Thomas of Celano, Francis' earliest biographer, says of the saint that '*...he delighted in all the works of God's hands and from the vision of joy on earth his mind soared aloft to the life-giving source and cause of it all. In everything beautiful he saw Him who is beauty itself and he followed his Beloved everywhere by his likeness imprinted on creation*'.¹ For Francis the entire universe – the self and the total environment to

¹ Celano, Second Life of St Francis

which the self belongs - is a theophany, a manifestation of God, a creative outpouring of the abundant goodness and love which is the life of the Blessed Trinity. God creates the world not out of necessity – there’s nothing inevitable about creation – but rather out of love; everything that is - is pure gift.

It’s important to recognize that Francis is not saying that the world is divine, there’s no hint of pantheism in his theology; rather he shows us that every created thing, if we have eyes to see it, can point us to God, the generous source and giver of all. Bonaventure talks of creation as a mirror reflecting the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of the Trinity, or again as bearing the footprint of God, or yet again of creation as a ‘book’ with every creature a word directing us to the Word. The ultimate word, the pinnacle of creation, is the Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ - God’s masterpiece of creation. Bonaventure says that *‘In his human nature Christ embraces something of every creature in himself.’*² Christ fulfils the creation. John Duns Scotus went so far as to propose that the incarnation would have happened even if Adam hadn’t fallen through disobedience; the incarnation wasn’t just God’s rescue plan to save us from our sins; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was always God’s ‘goal’ in creation. Jesus is the one who both expresses God’s love in all its fullness and who also who returns that love to the Creator perfectly, and it is to Christ that everything in creation leads³.

Such an understanding of creation as an outpouring from the fountain-fullness of God’s love and goodness had a profound effect on the way Francis looked at the world and looked at himself. There is in Francis, as in the Hebrew tradition, no hierarchy of the spiritual over the material. Matter matters. The view is quite often expressed by preachers today that the problem with our western society is that we are too materialistic, we overvalue the material at the expense of the spiritual. Francis, I think, would rather say that we are not nearly materialist enough. We take material things too lightly, we show no reverence towards creation, we take it for granted, we abuse and misuse it, we tend to see it as something to be possessed, controlled, manipulated or exploited for our own ends. In Francis’ world view everything is to be revered as having value because it’s from God. Recycling, I think he would say, is important, not simply because we are rapidly running out of land-fill sites, but because nothing is to be disregarded or discarded as valueless. There’s no such thing as trash. What we do with our rubbish is a profoundly spiritual affair. Such a way of seeing gave Francis an innate courtesy towards all creatures. He preached to the birds who happened to interrupt a more conventional sermon to people; he spoke respectfully to Brother Fire when his temples were

² Bonaventure, Five Feasts of the Child Jesus

³ Colossians 1.16

about to be cauterized with red-hot irons, and he told the gardener at the Friary to leave a place for the weeds and wild flowers because they had a right to be there. What environmentalist would argue with that?

Angela of Foligno, a Franciscan mystic of the fourteenth century, said that the world is 'pregnant with God'; the Franciscan tradition is essentially sacramental, everything in creation, even the smallest and the most despised part of it, can point beyond itself to reveal something of God to us. I get a glimpse of that when I watch one of David Attenborough's nature programmes, or when I read Ronald Blyth's 'Word from Wormingford' each week in the Church Times, or when I listen to the poetry of Thomas Traherne or Gerard Manley Hopkins. The challenge is to extend those glimpses, as Francis did, into a contemplative gaze that transforms our whole way of life.

The key to it all for Francis was his sense of 'giftedness'; he was overwhelmed by the generosity of God in and through creation and he lived in a constant state of grateful dependence. Essential to such an awareness was his relationship with 'Lady Poverty', the beautiful bride whom he sought to embrace throughout his life and whom he fought to defend against all who wanted to snatch her away from him. Poverty enabled Francis to recognise his fundamental dependence; it led him to see the simplest of things as 'gift' and caused him to overflow with joy and praise in response. There's a story of Francis and another brother begging for food through the streets of Assisi, and, when their bowls were sufficiently full, finding a rock and a stream to sit beside where they could share what they had collected. When Francis began to offer praise and thanks to God for the rich banquet set before them the other brother could stand it no longer; it was humiliating enough, he protested, to have had to go from house to house seeking food, but to describe the left-overs in their bowls as a 'banquet' was stretching it a bit too far for him. Francis replied that what made it a banquet was that everything they had received was pure gift – the food, the clear stream, even the rock on which they sat. And so they dined together in peace.

There's no beauty or virtue in poverty itself. Involuntary poverty, poverty that is imposed by circumstance of war, famine, unemployment, or injustice is an ugly curse that often de-humanises. Yet Francis, living in central Italy in a time of rapid economic growth and increasing prosperity, at the beginning of what we would call a market economy in which the use of currency was first becoming widespread, saw that affluence can be a burden that dulls our senses, our hearts and our imaginations. Living with so much, we tend to become pre-occupied and obsessed with possession, with holding,

keeping, guarding, accumulating and developing - and because of it we lose that sense of giftedness and gratitude, that virtue of dependence and delight which enables us to live feely and joyfully in our world. How often, as we trudge drearily around the supermarket, do we have any awareness of God's 'economy of gift' in what we drop into our trolleys? St Augustine of Hippo, preaching to his fifth century North African congregation challenges them: 'God longs to give you something [the precious gift of himself] but you are not able to receive it because your hands are already too full'. We are sated with what cannot sustain us; we are consumed by consumerism. I would suggest that the rediscovery of gift and the dependence, gratitude, generosity and joy which flows from it is an essential attitude to sustain us in the global future; life will be unsustainable without it.

Belonging to the family

Francis' joyful awareness of everything-that-is being an expression of the abundant goodness of God led him to see deep into the structure of the universe and to recognise in a profound way the fundamental connectedness of all things in God with each other. St Bonaventure, in his Major Life of St Francis, wrote that *'he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of "brother" or "sister" because he knew that they shared with him the same beginning⁴*. This sense of belonging, of 'familiness', is one of the particular insights of the Franciscan tradition: we are brothers and sisters, not just within the family of the virtuous or the family of the Church, so 'Sister Leper', 'Brother Robber', and 'Brother Muslim' are included. The family extends to the animal creation, not just to the cuddly creatures so it's 'Brother Wolf' and I suspect 'Sister Hornet' and 'Brother Scorpion' too. And the family embraces inanimate creatures as well, so it's 'Brother Sun' and 'Sister Moon', 'Brother Fire' and 'Sister Water'; even the darker aspects of life - pain and loss and 'Sister Death' - have familial roles to play.

The accounts of Francis' life often refer to his 'piety', not only towards God but in relationship to the rest of creation. Today we understand that word to have a solely religious connotation, a pious person is someone who acts religiously or performs certain religious actions, but the root meaning of the word refers to the faithful acknowledgement of the bonds of blood relationship within the family. Francis felt those bonds of relationship with every creature and every part of creation. Over a high table dinner in Cambridge, after preaching in one of the College Chapels, I was told by a leading geneticist that 'of course, we share ninety per cent of our genes with a banana'. Now, I'm no expert on these matters, and it may have been the port speaking, but it's clear that scientific advances,

⁴ Bonaventure, Major Legend of St Francis

particularly in biology and cosmology, are increasingly bringing home to us the essential connectedness of all things; all creatures are 'joined at the hip', we are all 'star dust'.

The irony of our present situation is that, in a world in which these developments in understanding are taking place, and in which we recognise the inevitability and growing pace of globalization, our actual experience is often of disconnectedness and isolation. We can communicate more rapidly than at any time in history, it's something of an obsession, yet we seem to find the making of 'pious' relationships within the family or the community increasingly difficult. We travel as tourists ever more widely and more often, we see the world more extensively and relocate more easily, and yet we are losing a sense of belonging to each other and to a place. We live in a culture that is increasingly virtual; so much experience is mediated by electronic gadgets that entail sensory deprivation – of touch, of smell, of certain sounds. Meanwhile, our obsession with comfort and safety not only deprives our children of the sense of freedom inspired by outdoors, a fact we now frequently lament, it deprives adults as well: how many of us see stars on a regular basis? We live 'at a distance', dislocated from the world around us. The American agrarian essayist and poet, Wendell Berry, writes: *'What we call the modern world is not necessarily, and not often, the real world, and there is no virtue in being up-to-date in it.....It is a false world, based upon economies and values and desires that are fantastical – a world in which millions of people have lost any idea of the materials, the disciplines, the restraints and the work necessary to support human life, and have thus become dangerous to their own lives and to the possibility of life.'*⁵ Berry's own response to that unreality is to practice good husbandry and a 'kindly use of the land'. He writes of the need to respect and serve the topsoil, stressing that human civilization is utterly dependent for its survival upon its relationship with the top twelve inches or so of what lies on the earth's land surface. Such a vision is profoundly scriptural. Professor Ellen Davis, in her 2007 Hulsean Lectures, in which she looks at the environment through the eyes of the of the scriptures and at the scriptures through the eyes of the environment, points out that the task of Adam - 'Son of the Earth', with the land in Genesis 2.15, usually translated 'to till it and tend it', would be better rendered by 'to serve it and to keep it', in the sense of observing the commandments or keeping the Sabbath. 'Serving and keeping' the land emphasises the intimate relationship which is necessary for humankind to flourish on it. Others, such as those belonging to the 'Slow Food Movement', are witnessing that our relationship with food – where and how it's grown, sold, prepared and consumed – urgently needs to change if we are to live sanely and healthily in the world. Yet others are trying, through their writing, their action and their campaigning, to challenge us into

⁵ Wendell Berry, *Standing on Earth*

re-connecting with our natural environment. Madeleine Bunting, writing in the Guardian last July in praise of Mark Cocker's wonderful book on rooks, 'Crow Country', points out the growing popularity of the genre of nature writing which explores the relationship between ourselves and the natural world: *'We need that attentiveness to nature to understand our humanity, and of how we fit, as just one species, into a vast reach of time and space.'*⁶ St Francis was neither a 'foodie', a farmer nor a nature writer, yet I believe he would understand this language and share these concerns because of the essentially relational truth of the universe which flows from the life of the Trinity.

Instruments of Peace

His awareness of belonging to one family with and through 'Brother Jesus' led Francis to seek relationships of peace and harmony which he believed appropriate to that insight and to work to overcome enmity wherever he found it. In his Testament, written at the end of his life, he recounts how he received from the Lord himself the greeting: 'May the Lord give you peace' and his brothers were instructed to share this greeting with whoever they met. He became renowned as a peacemaker in situations of conflict. Thomas, Archdeacon of Split, writing of a visit by Francis to the city in 1222, tells of his preaching there: *'...God conferred so much power on his words that they brought peace in many a seigniorial family torn apart until then by old, cruel and furious hatreds even to the point of assassinations.'*⁷ Three years before this Francis sought a resolution of the conflict between Christian and Muslim over the holy places in Palestine. He travelled to Egypt to join the crusading armies which were vainly attempting to wrest back control and, crossing over the enemy lines, he managed to speak directly to the Sultan of Egypt who received him with hospitality and reverence. It wasn't so much his negotiating skills which were effective (in fact they weren't, in the sense that the crusading army lost a disastrous battle and the Muslims kept control); rather, what seems to have impressed the Sultan, himself a cultured and spiritual man, was the humble and peaceful manner of Francis' approach which sought conversation about the things of God rather than making warlike and aggressive threats; this little poor man was clearly a person who embodied peace and who lived in gentleness towards others. Later on, after his return from the East, Francis tells those who wish to go among the Saracens *'...not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians.....'*⁸ and again *'I counsel, admonish and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ not to quarrel or argue or judge others when they go about in the world; but let them be meek, peaceful, modest, gentle, and humble, speaking*

⁶ Madeleine Bunting, The Guardian, July 30th 2007

⁷ Francis of Assisi, Vol II Early Documents, Ed Regis Armstrong OFM. Cap.

⁸ St Francis, Earlier Rule. Chapter 26

*courteously to everyone, as is becoming*⁹. His peaceable and courteous relationship with the natural world, and his humble courtesy towards those who were universally thought of at the time as enemies, were of one and the same approach.

Issues concerning the environment, the possession of land, access to food, water and energy, are at the heart of most of the world's conflicts and the tension over these is likely to increase as resources grow scarcer with the pressure of unsustainable development. Changing climates and the possibility of rising sea levels which could displace millions in low-lying areas, increasing desertification and the collapse of fish stocks, and competition for minerals and carbon fuel sources; all these make wars between different races, cultures and faith communities more likely. Paradoxically, it may also be that a growing sense of urgency about our destructive lack of relationship with the natural world will be the one thing which can bring together conflicting nations, races, religions and communities in common concern and action. Finding peace among the human community may depend upon our learning to live peacefully within the wider family of creation. It's a hopeful sign that there are being established today a growing number of Christian/Muslim projects and initiatives concerning the environment which have the potential to bring about deeper and more sensitive mutual understanding between the different faith traditions. It may yet turn out that the great world faiths are the means to peace rather than its obstacle.

Singing the Song.

Francis' preaching often, if not always, included a call to repentance with dire warnings of hell fire for those who were unwilling to turn in penitence towards God. This may not fit in with the popular, romantic image of the Poverello, nor with pulpit practice today, yet it follows from everything I've said above about Francis' world-view. A world which can express no gratitude for the essential goodness and giftedness of all that is; a world in which creatures - human, animate and inanimate - are out of harmony with each other; above all, a world which sees no end, no purpose, other than self-fulfilment and self-satisfaction is doomed to experience the extinction of species, including that of the human. St Bonaventure stresses the danger of losing sight of our true purpose and of living out of tune with the world around us: *Open your eyes, alert your spiritual ears, unseal your lips and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love, serve, glorify and honour God, lest the whole world rise up against you. For "the universe shall wage war against the foolish"*¹⁰. Archbishop Rowan, in his recent book, 'Tokens of Trust', writes: '*...our present ecological crisis has a lot to do with our failure to*

⁹ St Francis, Later Rule, Chapter 3

¹⁰ Bonaventure, The Journey of the Soul into God

*think of the world as existing in relation to the mystery of God, not just a huge warehouse of stuff to be used for our convenience.*¹¹ The Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew II, who holds a passionate concern for the environment, promotes the idea of eco-penance; only by expressing penitence for our abuse of creation and by a fundamental change in perception of our place and purpose in the world can we be brought back into true relationship with each other and with our Creator.

For Francis, the goal of all creation and of every creature, is to share the life of the Trinity, to live in grateful dependence, to engage in loving and attentive relationship, and to return thanks and praise to the source of all; as the Westminster Catechism puts it: ‘...to know God, to enjoy God and to worship God for ever.’ Towards the end of his life he composed for his brothers the Canticle of the Creatures, a song which gives voice to all creation in praise and honour of God:

*Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
To you be praise, glory, honour and blessing.
Only to you, Most High, do they belong
And no one is worthy to call upon your name.
May you be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures.....*¹²

...and he goes on to include the sun, moon, stars, earth, water, fire, plants, fruits and flowers. Everything gives praise, finds its true purpose, by being what it truly is and by doing what it does – the sun in shining, the moon in gleaming, the stars in glistening, the earth in producing, fire in warming etc – and we, the human brothers and sisters of Francis join in the song. Most people seem to think that worship is something done exclusively in and by churches – with organs and choirs and the like – and, certainly, the task of the Church is to offer praise and worship back to God, but Francis reminds us that when we worship in church we are joining in with something that has been going on since the beginning of time, since the ‘morning stars sang together’. Perhaps we should spend more effort and energy in trying to sing in tune with them rather than just working our way through Hymns Ancient & Modern or Mission Praise! Having lived at Hilfield Friary now for a good number of years, I’ve seen from the experience of some of those who have come to us quite broken and lost and who have

¹¹ Rowan Williams, Tokens of Trust

¹² The Canticle of the Creatures, trans Regis Armstrong, Francis of Assisi, Early Documents

worked the land with us - and I know from my own experience too - how engaging closely with creation can heal, restore and re-direct our lives; it can become an act of praise and worship. Singing from the same song-sheet with the whole created order brings us back into right relationship with ourselves, with each other and with the Source and Giver of all.

An Integrated Ecology

Sir Jonathan Porritt, the environmental campaigner and founder of the Friends of the Earth movement, wrote a couple of years ago that what is needed in response to the threat of climate change is not simply international agreement on carbon emissions (important though that may be), but nothing less than a radical re-orientation of our attitude to, and relationship with, our natural environment. There is a real danger in relying solely on technology to 'sort it all out' as President Bush proposes - so that, presumably, we can go on living the American Dream in much the same way as before, steadily increasing our consumption, living out of harmony with creation and each other etc. The problem we face is a much deeper one than the likely devastating effects of climate change; it's a problem that concerns the loss of our home - with each other, with the universe and in God, a loss which we are only now beginning to comprehend. The word 'ecology' itself refers to our 'oikos', our home; we need an ecology which recognises our 'belonging' as part of the universe with each other in God. Francis of Assisi, with his sense of abundant giftedness, his recognition of brotherhood/sisterhood, and with his participation in the song of all creation, offers an ecology which brings together the environmental, the social and the spiritual. Such an integrated ecology is one that can lead us to the radical re-orientation that Jonathan Porritt identifies as necessary - a revolution in our thinking, our living and our praying that can be wisdom for a global future.