

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 15 Year B 2015

In October 2013 I had the great joy of spending part of my annual leave in Assisi the birth place and home of St Francis and to be there to celebrate his feast day on October 4th. I also happened to be there the day the newly elected Pope Francis decided to call by the town of his namesake. The little hillside town was all a buzz with anticipation and excitement. And just around the corner from where I was staying, in the piazza outside the cathedral in Assisi the local townspeople had made a path of flowers - petals and leaves and coloured sawdust - according to a very intricate pattern. They had worked on it for days, day and night. It was made to celebrate the feast of St Francis, but also as a mark of honour to the Pope who was to use it as his entrance into the cathedral. But when he arrived, and in his usual non-conformist manner, refused to walk over it... (And in so doing in fact offended the locals who had worked so tirelessly on it.)

In a similar vein, in some catholic cultures for the feast of Corpus Christi an elaborate, outdoor pathway of flowers is also made, and which marks the route the Blessed Sacrament will pass. Again, they take days to prepare, only to be trampled on, washed away and swept away after the days' celebrations. Why the time, why the money, why the effort? Well, as a mark of exuberant generosity, of abundant self-giving: of *not holding back*. Being reckless and generous in an offering to God who has been so reckless and generous in his love to us.

Now, so often for us, our instinct after creating something so magnificent and detailed and intricate is to hold on to it, to keep it, to put it behind glass, to take copious photos, to hold onto the moment. But most religious traditions in one way or another recognise the danger in this desire to hold on. And something as simple as path of flowers and sawdust and petals - destroyed in a moment - actually provides an important life lesson. Yes, we can create something beautiful and marvellous. But no happiness will be gained by wanting to hold on to it, of thinking they are ends in themselves. All of us will - and all we hold precious in time will - be swept away. Faith teaches us to prepare for this hard reality.

But sometimes we want to ignore or dismiss these important lessons. Oftentimes, an act of generosity, of exuberance, of recklessness (yes, in money, time, talent, love) is seen as a waste, as unnecessary. *The flowers won't last, why bother... Surely this jar of ointment could be sold and the proceeds given to the poor...* But of course, such objections miss the point. The point being that holding lightly to things is *liberating*, because they *are not* ends in themselves. We *all* need reminders that our lives unfold on a much wider horizon, and that being unencumbered by the things of this world frees us to recognize our ultimate destiny.

It is a sure truth of faith that we can only be open to the mystery and joy of life, open to the gift of other people, open to the call of God on our lives if we don't hold on to things too tightly, if we are not weighed down, if allow ourselves to become detached from the non-essentials. It is difficult to make our way to God if we are too closely bound to the 'stuff' around us.

We can - all of us - get so terribly weighed down (attached) to the stuff around us. Not just material goods, but ideas, grudges, memories. We talk about the baggage we carry, and so often that really *is* the best way to describe those things which hold us back and keep us down, that prevent us from living the free and abundant life God offers us in Christ. This weight, this baggage, these attachments prove themselves to be incredibly resilient, tenacious. Anxiety about our health and family problems; anxiety about job security; weighed down by pressure to conform to what we think others expect of us; weighed down by possessions and status; attached to a false image of ourselves, attached to sins of the past, attached to ancient guilts. Some of these things follow people their whole lives, weigh them down their whole lives.

The challenge of the gospel today is that it is hard to be effective in mission if we are weighed down, if we carry too much with us. If there are misguided and misdirected attachments, we cannot readily heed Christ's call and go where he sends. Christ shows that to share in his work of proclaiming the Good News we must travel light; that we cannot rely on our own strength and resources.

The careful details - the rules and regulations about how Jesus' disciples are to travel - really just say, '*nothing but the absolute essentials.*' Nothing extra. No 'what ifs'. No 'just in cases'. The bare minimum. The profound truth the Lord Jesus points us to is that we cannot be bearers of the good news of the kingdom (of the reign of God) if we are *distracted*. We cannot be attentive to the things of the Spirit if we are weighed down, if we are anxious, if we are trying to appease too many voices, if we are preoccupied. In travelling light - in being stripped to the bare minimum - we have no option but to look up and trust God. We cannot rely on what we bring with us, on our clever ideas or fanciful inventions, the confidence we have in ourselves. All we are, and all we can hope to be, is *dependent on God*.

These hard lessons of detachment are so important because they are lesson in trust. The life of faith, the life which looks to God is the life of trust. Do we trust that God is on our side? Do we trust that God will be good to his word? Do we trust that God will fulfil his promises in our lives and in our world? Do trust that God is actually *for us*? This message of trust is the essential message of the Gospel today. Jesus sends out his disciples just as he sends us: don't rely on your past, don't rely on what you bring with you. Don't trust your accumulated layers of baggage. *Trust in God alone*. And coming to trust in God's goodness - that God *will* provide - then we might also come to trust each other a bit more as well; to trust the goodness that lay in the hearts of those we meet on the road; that the world and the stranger really aren't as scary as we sometime imagine them to be; trust in God's goodness and providence enough to be free, generous, open.

The freedom God offers us in Christ is not a freedom simply for our 'therapy' or benefit alone. The liberation Christ brings is not just so we feel good about ourselves. We do not seek to become detached so that we might become enlightened individuals. No. We receive God's gift of freedom so to give glory to his name and to share his good news. We endeavour to become free, liberated from our baggage and unencumbered from our distractions so that we become free to *trust*. It is when we trust that we become real about faith. Amen.