

Crib, Cross & Communion

Evaluating Franciscan spirituality as a tool for parish ministry

Introduction

The Franciscan rule and life is to observe the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This essay marks the outset of a new ministry in a Church of England parish in suburban Newcastle upon Tyne, and seeks to evaluate what might inform a strategy for church development related to the character and teaching of St Francis of Assisi. Can Franciscan values be made into a template for mission and ministry, offering a distinctive language and world-view for an un-churched generation, and a reason for becoming a follower of Jesus? To what extent is the gospel a programme, a power, a message, or a lifestyle, that can be shared by Christians in a community today?

I will begin by exploring why St Francis speaks to our age, and then I will look at the interaction between the gospel and culture in the millennium prior to St Francis. I will offer a brief summary of Franciscan spirituality, drawing on the Canticum of the Creatures, and then I will examine how the values it raises might interact with the present context in which we live (characterized by the term "post-modernity"), using the papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* as a case-study. To conclude I offer some themes for church life that might form an agenda for a parish in the next generation.

Why St Francis of Assisi?

When Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio became pope on 13th March 2013 he took the name Francis, the first pope (to dare) to do so! St Francis has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in recent times, for example in England in the 19th century amongst Roman Catholic churches in England as the Roman hierarchy re-established itself, and in the 20th century a number of new Anglican churches were dedicated to St Francis. There are currently 46 Anglican benefices in England dedicated to Francis, and one each in Wales and Ireland, an average of one per English diocese. The parish in which I have recently begun to work was founded as a missional district in 1935 and the new church consecrated in 1953. There are people alive who remember the foundation, but no-one can account for the choice of patron, except perhaps that amidst the cataclysm of world-war it was an expression of rebuilding and hope. In 1939 Pope Pius XII, in the face of imminent catastrophe, declared St Francis (along with Catherine of Siena), patron of the newly recognized Italian state.

Francis, poor and humble, truly the image of Jesus Christ, gave unlimited examples of the life of the Gospel to the very turbulent men of his age, and by establishing his three orders, opened to them a swift way towards the correction of morals both private and public, and to the true sense of the Catholic faith. In the same way did the most

vigorous and devout virgin Catherine effectively work to encourage and establish harmony between the cities and towns of her land ...

I write on the verge of the referendum concerning Europe. If churches dedicated to Francis were built in the hope of connecting his spirituality with a fresh vision of human flourishing after war in Europe, is it possible to restate a Franciscan vision in a world of global perspective, which is more than just European peace? In his book *Richest of Poor Men*¹ JH Moorman summarizes Franciscan spirituality as humility, simplicity, poverty and prayer, which he describes as the four foundation stones upon which Francis built. Richard Boileau² writes "*In the holy man of Assisi, we find prayer and action in perfect equilibrium. In prayer, we find the key to peace and joy. Prayer fortifies action and keeps it aligned with the will of God.*" Among the many stories of Francis, three of the most enduring are the establishment of the first crib at Greccio, the receiving of the stigmata at Mount Laverna, and the vision before the cross of St Damiano with the command to "rebuild the church". The fusion of spirituality and action therefore has theological roots derived from the Incarnation, Salvation and the Church, popularly described as "crib, cross and communion".

The Gospel and Culture in the First Millennium

John J. Burkhard³ observes that 20th century scholarship of the *evangelion* has two approaches: one understands the good news as emerging from Hellenistic religious movements, a syncretic expression for the *imperium*, where the good news is a singular event of universal impact, for example as expressed in Luke 2.10-11. Another approach is seen in "post-war Salvation History" (drawing on Jewish tradition) whereby the messenger becomes the eschatological figure, so a message becomes embodied and the revelation is not only verbal-cognitive, it becomes praxis-oriented (cf Luke 4.18). He identifies that in scripture *evangelion* and *evangelizesthai* occur frequently in Paul and the Pauline epistles, a little in Mark and Matthew, rarely in Luke-Acts and not at all in John, and that they are often associated with proclamation, speaking or announcing, and responses include recognition, receiving, believing, keeping and dwelling. He argues that it is a linguistic encounter with a conversion effect. Early exponents (preachers, prophets, apostles, heralds and teachers) are verbal and people are *changed*; but as it became a church of the masses the early church became a settled institution with ministers who maintained a *status quo*, whereas the radical idealism of living gospel values (cf Acts 4) was left to monks who evolved as a kind of spiritual elite (for example Columba and Boniface in the British Isles) and whose holiness often produced mass conversions. Burkhard traces a line of development to the end of the first millennium where the emergence of Franciscan spirituality coincided with new developments. The struggles for political power in Europe had seen the articulation of a separation of sacred and secular power by Pope Nicholas II (1059-1061). The first crusade was called by Pope Urban II in 1095 and led to the recapture of Jerusalem in 1099. As engagement with the

wider world grew, so did commerce and wealth, and consequently poverty. Poverty was no longer a route to the idealized existence of early church but a social challenge to share the fate of those left behind. Into this social context Francis preached conversion and penance as a model of discipleship *within the goodness of the created order*. Preaching poverty undermined layers of social status and the emergence of the friars minor as itinerant preachers was revolutionary. Burkhard observes that this movement quickly became clerical, so the conversion they preached was attached to the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion, undermining the bias to the poor by depending on the ordained clergy. He argues that this was unresolved until the Reformation (the age of printing) which sought (again) to redefine the right of all believers to preach for themselves, and this is perhaps what is happening in our own consciousness changing internet age. So does Franciscan spirituality have a distinctive voice? The Rule of St Francis is a key text, alongside various prayers, but I would like to focus on The Canticle of the Creatures (or The Canticle of the Sun) which is first mentioned in the *Vita Prima* of Thomas of Celano in 1228 and is thought to have been written (or dictated) by Francis in 1224, with the verses about death and reconciliation being added at a later date just before his own death.

The Canticle of the Sun : St Francis, the Gospel and Culture

The Canticle of the Sun unites personal and universal themes, from praise of brother sun and sister moon, through earth, wind, fire and water, to personal reconciliation and the death of every person. Its scope is at once cosmic and personal:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, yours are the praises,
the glory, and the honour, and all blessing;
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.

Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun, Who is the day
and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night,
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace for by You,
Most High, shall they be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.

Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm

Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.

The great genius of the poem is that it makes creation relational, without it becoming the worship of creation. The elements point us to God, so for example the sun bears the likeness of God in his life and light-giving, but is not God. Water is praised as a symbol of chastity, always going to the lowest place; fire, earth and water are also highly textured theological metaphors. The verses on reconciliation and death are at once deeply personal and pastoral, but their position in the poem emphasizes that Francis placed human affairs in the context of the stewardship of Creation and this was challenging in his own age, and remains so even to this day, where in spite of our ecological awareness, humanity is bent on the consumption of resources as its dominant social and economic model.

The Gospel and Post-Modernity: release from self concern and engaging in community

The modern person tends to say: "because we can figure it all out, we're in charge." The postmodern person tends to say "Human beings can never figure it all out; therefore, there is no authority and...I'm in charge. No one else can tell me what's true." ⁴

Ilia Delio⁵ distinguishes between modernity (which puts its faith on the immutable laws of science) and post-modernity which takes the self as its reference point. She quotes Thomas Merton:

*The world is the unquiet city of those who love for themselves and are therefore divided against one another in a struggle that cannot end...it is the city of those who are fighting for possession of limited things and for the monopoly of goods and pleasures that cannot be shared by all.*⁶

She relates Franciscan identity to *community* as a form of gospel life, and suggests this should be a way of life that values common purpose, mutual care and a shared capacity for suffering. She says it is not enough to name the core values, "*they must be lived, embodied and brought into dialogue with the contemporary milieu*". Only a living community can do this, but she observes that we shelter ourselves in bourgeois lifestyles divorced from committed solidarity with the world, and especially the poor, and wonders whether this is really possible? She argues that it is, in a shared spiritual vision in the context of a community life. So, for example, when Francis speaks of "we" rather than "I", when St Clare calls herself a mirror and example of Christ, not over and against the world, but engaging with it. At its heart she argues that the renewal of religious identity means release from self-concern.

Shall I only enjoy what I know everyone can enjoy? And if I know someone can't enjoy something, then why should I?

No template is offered, just a challenge to do it. Quoting laws of thermodynamics, that things reach a point of equilibrium before entropy sets in, she nonetheless advocates a fresh incursion of energy for a new kind of growth. Burkhard writes:

The truth of the gospel...should be presented less in terms of the absoluteness of present claims and of our regarding these claims and more as a reality to which we surrender in the hope of discovering its power to humanize and to create human community"

He quotes Ghislain Lafont⁷ who points to early church episcopacy which focused on salvific power of gospel rather than defining its content: *go and say what you have seen*. This means we live the gospel not by trying to be right, but in the search for meaning in participation with other humans. Signs of this include ecology, feminism, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue; evangelization means witnessing to Christ in dialogue with others. In early modernity the Franciscans and Clares became poor, in our own age this should not be sentimental (moribund) poverty but a solidarity with present-day suffering and marginalization, an active engagement, which will (he argues) require imagination and courage, but which embraces the Franciscan evocation of the gospel as a personal relationship with God in creation, articulated through a relationship with other people in a wider ecological framework. This is precisely what we encounter in the Cantic of The Creatures.

A case study in Franciscan Spirituality and Post-Modern Culture : *Laudato Si'*

Pope Francis produced a striking interaction with post-modernity in his encyclical dated 24th May 2015 *Laudato Si'*⁸ (the Umbrian words opening the Canticle of the Creatures). He identifies a number of themes concerning the environment which might be characterized as Franciscan, because they set the thriving of human relationships within an ecological framework:

- The intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet
- The conviction that everything in the world is connected
- The critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology
- The call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress
- The value proper to each creature
- The human meaning of ecology
- The need for forthright and honest debate
- The serious responsibility of international and local policies
- The throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle

In the present crisis of global warming this is a thoroughly modern use of Franciscan spirituality, and it stands in a long tradition of interaction between the values expressed in the teaching and ministry of St Francis and the life of the Church, the abandonment of self and finding of personhood in community.

Another Franciscan writer Jane Kopas⁹ looks at personhood. "*To discern how God's Spirit is leading us to be inspired by the vision of Francis in this world of change, we need not only to fix our hearts on God but also to hone new skills that transcend concepts and traditional thinking about thinking.*" She surveys post-modern views of personhood and decides they can be constructive and unifying as well as destructive and alienating. She cites conversion, *imago dei*, brother-sister relationship, community/relationality and poverty, quoting thinkers such as Alexander of Hales and John Duns Scotus, ending with a set of values that bind people together: Goodness, Primacy of Affective Life, Will and Contingency. Kopas recognizes that these are abstract concepts and lack vitality, so she tries to get to heart of Franciscan personhood, using the miraculous tales known as The Little Flowers of St Francis. She argues that most biographies of St Francis set him in the meta-narrative of Christ, who is in the meta-narrative of God's salvific history, but they are the harder to grasp for that. The Little Flowers vary between accurate description and metaphorical hyperbole, but Kopas persists and argues that this often-neglected source shows a subversion of self, sometimes because the stories are non-sensible, negligent, foolish or impractical. One such story has Francis walking with Brother Masseo until they reach a cross-roads and they don't know which way to go. Francis suggests spinning in a circle until they fall down, and whichever way they fall, that is the way to walk! Kopas says that we cannot talk of being a Franciscan person

because that would be to take ourselves too seriously, whereas Francis entered more and more deeply into Jesus self-emptying. She observes that St. Bonaventure, an early biographer of Francis, posits Francis as a prototype rather than an archetype. He puts into Francis's mouth "May Christ teach you what is yours", and for Francis it is the concrete "this-ness" of things and encounters and situations which teach him what is his to do.

Conclusion : Shaping a church with Franciscan values

A church vision for the future that embodies Franciscan spirituality, which is itself an attempt to put gospel values at the heart of creation, would have to embody an abandonment of self, and finding meaning in community.

This requires a programme for promoting spiritual awareness, self awareness and social awareness. Attending to God must be established with prayer and worship, the encouragement of discipleship and vocation, pilgrimage and the placing of social and pastoral relationships within the worshipping life of the church, including the Eucharist, healing, and the occasional offices. Attending to self awareness requires a programme that forms a realistic view of our history in the local community and the wider urban regional, national and global context in which we live. It might include inter-religious dialogue as a medium of witness, and the part we play in the care and stewardship of Creation. The third is social awareness, and especially understanding poverty in an age of consumption, global migration and celebrity culture, technological innovation and philosophical relativism.

Burkhard reminds us that the word "gospel" is one of Karl Rahner's ¹⁰primordial words. It is charged with meaning, it mediates mystery and is richer than our capacity to define or convey its meaning. The effort to articulate its meaning, however, to speak it, is what drew people to its transforming power. Jesus found it in Isaiah and it led to his preaching of the kingdom. The first Christians found it in Jesus Christ and filled the Mediterranean world with the spiritual power of the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Francis heard it in his meditation on the Cross and reading of scripture, and absorbed it and offered a fresh vision.....can we discern it in Francis, and allow it to transform the church as a community in our own age for the proclamation of the Kingdom?

3190 words

¹ DLT 1977

² www.cribandcross.org

³ Defining Gospel Life in Postmodern Culture, John J. Burkhard, O.F.M.Conv.

⁴ Dominic V. Monti O.F.M. Introduction to Franciscan Identity & Post Modern Culture WTU Symposium Papers 2002

⁵ on Franciscan Theology, Identity and Community in FIPC

⁶ New Seeds of Contemplation, 1961 by Thomas Merton NYP 1961

⁷ Imagining the Catholic Church, Liturgical Press 2000

⁸ On Care for our Common Home CTS 2015

⁹ A Franciscan Interpretation of person in a postmodern Culture, Jane Kopas, O.S.F

¹⁰ Priest & Poet Baltimore 1967