

“LET’S BEGIN AGAIN!”



THOUGHTS ON FRANCIS, FRIEND OF EARTH.

800 YEARS AFTER EMBRACING SISTER DEATH

***Readings: Micah 6. 1-4, 6-8; Psalm 100 Galatians 6.14-
end Luke 12.22-34***

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A word ***from*** Francis ***for*** churches on Care for Creation:

“Let’s begin again....” (for we have done little).

Francesco Bernadone has rightly been repurposed as inspiration for all who cherish **both** love for God in Christ **and** that love for our neighbours, **of whatever species**, without which we cannot claim to love God at all.

Without which we fail in our calling, of Genesis 2, to **be** Earth **for** the Earth.

Francis is also the exponent of the power of the powerless. Spiritually, of the value even of **failure** offered to God.

Francis the dancing beggar who spoke **as** respectfully to popes and cardinals as he did to lepers and paupers, and who in **his** age of bloody crusades engaged the **Sultan** in peaceful conversation.

Francis is our inspiration for the dance of joy **we** can celebrate whenever we realise that, though taking two steps back, we may **still** find we've taken one forward.

“Let's begin again....”

I hope you're getting to know and love the creatures around you today. Their personalities, their quirks. The gifts they bring and the stories they open up as they touch our lives.

But also their value in their own right, rather than just what they bring us.

So much for the **humans**.

You **could** say the same for our puppets, standing in for all those fellow creatures to whom St Francis expressed overt kinship, tapping in to that great tradition of **western** saints, whose personal interaction with the **more-than human** authenticates both their **sanctity**....And that **sanity** which **loves and listens to** the Communion of Creation; Which also allows that when we enter into conversation with the Earth, the creatures **will** teach **us**. The birds in heaven, the fish in the sea who worship **with** us.

“WITH”

The most radical word you'll hear today. Perhaps the most Franciscan word. **WITH**

Christ, Emmanuel, God-**with**-us is therefore God-**with**-Earth. The Rainbow Covenant of Genesis 9 is meticulously inclusive of the Earth, and all life on Earth **in order** to include us.

The Covenant of God and the Earth. In which, as friends in the Pacific are at pains to tell me, humanity is not **other** than the Earth.

This despite the supremacist caricatures of the Enlightenment in the last three hundred years during

which, according to Rowan Williams ***“an insanely unbalanced account of human entitlement ... has ... ignored ... the interdependence of human life... and the organic order as a whole:”***

The Season of Creation; the collaborative creation of many Christian traditions, ***now*** begins in September with the ***Feast of Creation in Christ***. Celebrating the ***personal*** involvement of God Incarnate in the Earth.

But the Season reserves culmination for ***this*** Day of St Francis, with whom we are invited to dance that very simple but terrifying leap of a faith openly displayed in our readings, but hushed and hidden by the prudishness of the church during the last century.

In these days of pronoun precision, this is the leap from ***“it”*** for everything other than human, to ***“who”***. Even for the Earth.

It's looking fellow creatures in the eye and finding God looking back. The reclaiming ***with*** Christ of the most sophisticated mode of relationship - the personal - ***with*** everything ***who***, having breath, is called to praise our Sustainer.

For when ***Jesus*** spoke ***personally*** to the turmoil of the elements, the purpose and outcome was the saving of lives.

That's how serious it remains today: to engage with a planet screaming in agony; not by a **“war against climate change”**, but in the theme of the World Council of Churches' Decade of Climate Justice, by making peace **on AND WITH** Earth.

So: Praise be to you my Lord **with** all your creatures sings Francis.

Though reading his ***Canticle of the Creatures***, you have to keep an eye on twentieth century translators sneakily substituting “through” for **“with”** all God's creatures, perhaps for fear you might abruptly be transformed into some terrible “pagan” who refuses to reduce fellow mortals to a means to an end.

The same with Christian publishers' insistence on spelling the name of our planet with a small “e”, just in case you're seduced into the **mutually dependent love** of Francis, who loves the Earth like a mother or a sister. Because all this makes a difference to how you think, how you pray from then on.

That's absolutely **not** that wishy washy twentieth century “stewardship of possessions” model. Rather, it's “partnership **with** life.”

With - as Pope Leo has observed - with a **very** special place and purpose for humanity. Like the good shepherd who lays down their life, rather than the hired hand who sells out.

Surely, what Jesus is teaching, who also asks hearers to learn from all the trees, and from the wildlife specified by Luke in our reading, is the humility to recognise beauty and value beyond what might be dreamed of in our philosophies.

So when we read that verse “*How much more valuable **are** you than the birds?*” ...punctuate that as a **question**, rather than a final statement.

Again, for that we might need the courage to resist, as Francis resisted, values we’ve grown up with.

Our Gospel reading became a manifesto for Francis: a programme of intimate justice both for nature and the poor. However ham-fisted and disruptive were his own first stumbling attempts.

Francis, the wealthy merchant’s son, broken in body and mind by his year as a prisoner of war; Francis believing himself personally called face to face by Christ in the ruins of San Damiano church to “**go and repair my home, which you see, is all in ruins**”.

So **he** got to work, **clumsily**, in what seemed the most obvious way. Chuck money at it. Sell off his father’s property.

Even the horse. Strip off in court when challenged that he’d given what was not his to give.

Changing sides to make peace in the war of the rich on the poor. Which in our day is the war of wealth on life.

Letting go of who he had been.

Is that what it takes for **us** to grasp there is more to repair than one building. More to repair than one faith tradition.

We're now confronted by the ruins of our **common home**; ruined by our alienation from the Earth **of** whom and **for** whom we're made.

As time goes on, and a community grows around him, we find Francis the shameless master not of the **cheap** gimmick, but the **deep** gimmick. Making sure that faith is grounded in experience. Neither explaining miracles away, nor insisting they must be in **conflict** with nature.

That's Francis: sensitively **negotiating** permission from church authorities to bring living farm animals into a Christmas celebration; because Francis so deeply **valued** the integrity of the Church as the community of Christ : calling siblings in faith to account for our **refusal** to live up to the demands of the Gospel. Not dismantling but lovingly repurposing the church.

Toward the end of his life, Francis the rebel wrote:

We ought to honour and revere all the theologians and those who preach the most holy word of God, as dispensing to us spirit and life.

Francis today is the unifying inspiration of conferences I attended in Assisi, in which fourteen of the major church families of the world were represented, moving towards **formal** recognition of a feast of Creation in Christ in their calendars.

And his ecological wisdom gains respect beyond the amusement previously reserved for one who preaches to birds.

The real-world transformation of ecosystems on the reintroduction of apex predators recalls the story of St Francis and the wolf of Gubbio; who by his intervention was transformed from feared vermin to a beloved neighbour.

Yes there **will** be conflicts between human and other interests, but **negotiation rather than eradication** has to be the preferred option.

Those diverse personalities of Creation are well-represented in our readings today, though I had to ask for **those** verses of **Micah** to be restored, where **Creation** acts as a court in judgment upon the harm done by chosen human injustice.

Justice does not exist in isolation from Creation, just as it's pointless to send aid to your neighbour without attention to their environment.

The other verses from Micah critique our forlorn tendency to buy off disaster at the cost of the fellow creatures whose wellbeing, science now agrees with the prophets is essential to ours.

And it's the key insight of prophecy that injustice really does harm the Earth. That Sin of the world that the Lamb of God takes away. Prophecy doesn't wait patiently for every last forensic detail to be in place before speaking out.

So it's not just people, but first of all the **Earth** who's called to shout for joy to the Lord, where that word for "people" in our Psalm is the one used in Proverbs for ants and badgers. The Hebrew Scriptures offer only one definitive word for "living being". The ranks of which Adam joined when life was breathed into the clay. Creation is personal.

So let's begin again:

It's one of the greatest misapprehensions that we live in a secular age.

Rather, the idolatries of money, power, oil, and the recently ordained prophet Al... these demons daily and aggressively usurp any and all thrones, and faith, which might have been reserved for gods.

The war which Christ observed between God and Mammon, in which Francis of Assisi found he had to switch sides to be in solidarity with the Earth, their creatures, and downtrodden humanity: - this is **not** some historically remote conflict with no further casualties.

The science of attribution admits of **no** uncertainty that the demand for new oil and gas is also a demand to kill and displace your neighbour.

I'm grateful to activist Roger Hallam, imprisoned for a Zoom meeting planning non-violent action, for exposing the lethal cowardice of our insistence, in talk of crisis, on "**could**" and "**might possibly**" when the balance of evidence is towards "**really will**". In this respect, business as usual is sin as usual.

Like the collapse of the glacier in Nepal, which with the support of reputable climate science, their government has attributed to those fossil fuels over which our politicians still squabble....

That's all there's time for. Except Francis once more:

"I have done what is mine to do. May Christ show you what is yours to do."