

What is Man?

4 10 09

O God,
you ever delight to reveal yourself to the child-like and lowly of heart
grant that, following the example of the blessed Francis,
we may count the wisdom of this world foolishness
and know only Christ crucified,

My text may be found in today's reading from Psalm 8:

'What is Man that you should be mindful of him?' (v5)

Today, October 4th, is the feast day of a 12th century saint whom we in the 21st century find particularly attractive. Baptised Giovanni, he became known as Francesco, the Frenchman, because his father, a cloth merchant trading with France, had married a French wife from Provence and their son was born there. Francis, as we know him in English, was a stroppy boy who clashed with his father. He was expected to take on the family business; instead, a soldier in a local war between his home town of Assisi and Perugia, he suffered the indignity of being captured and imprisoned. This seeming set-back turned his life around. Francis returned a serious-minded youth given to renovating churches that had fallen into disrepair, for example San Damiano, and to caring for the poor, in particular lepers. In this was the theme of his life, his life's work and his legacy: to rebuild the Church by dedicating himself to a life of simplicity and poverty. Immensely attractive, he drew many to him and he founded the order of Friars

Minor better known as the Franciscans. A friar and a deacon but not a priest, Francis's personal spiritual life was simple rigorous and disciplined. He felt a great love and compassion for people and a respect for the wonder and diversity of the natural world. He so identified with the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ that he received the Stigmata the marks of the wounds of Christ on his body. The end of his life was full of physical pain and he died in great discomfort in 1226 aged only 45. Two year later in 1228, he was canonised a saint by Gregory IX.

In Psalm 8, the psalm appointed for today, St Francis would have found support for the central thrust of his ministry: compassion for people and respect for the natural world. Here, the Psalmist is contemplating what it is to be a Man in the context of God's creation. My text is from verse 5: 'What is Man that you should be mindful of him?' but the question has its context in the preceding verse. In verse 4, we read:

'When I consider your heavens the work of your fingers

The moon and the stars which you have set in order'

Clearly, the Psalmist is reflecting on the nature of what it is to be a Man in the context of the wonder and vastness of God's creation. On my way back from Cologne last week, I spent the night at Precey and in the middle of the countryside, without the benefit of street lighting, the clear night sky was wonderful, magnificent, full of stars. No wonder then the Psalmist should wonder what it is to be a Man and why God should be mindful of him.

In verses 6 to 9, the Psalmist reflects the teaching in Genesis 1 about the nature and status of Mankind:

'Yet you have made him little less than a god
and have crowned him with glory and honour'
You have made him master of your handiwork;
and have put all things in subjection beneath his feet.
all sheep and oxen:
and all the creatures of the field,
the birds of the air and the fish of the sea:
and everything that moves in the pathways of the great waters.'

Firstly, we are 'little less than a god . . . crowned with glory and honour'. To be a human being is to be made in the image of God. We are conscious, rational, moral beings who are aware of ourselves and the world in which we live. And as such, we are equipped to undertake a god-like stewardship of God's creation. In Genesis, we read that God places a huge responsibility on Man to be a Lord of his creation. It is our duty to be responsible stewards of his will and of his legacy.

St Francis lived out such a life and as such is an example for us all. He acknowledged that all are made in the image of God: not just rich merchants like his father and the privileged class in which he grew up but also the poor in the streets of Assisi and the lepers living on the margin of their city state. The challenge of Psalm 8 and of St Francis to us is to be fully what it is to be a Man. To be fully human is to be conscious, awake and aware, not of only of ourselves but of God; not only of other people but of the whole of creation. Truth is God loves us; truth is God wants us to love not only ourselves in the wonder of what it

is to be embodied but he also wants us to love and respect the whole of his living world.

But do we?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

4th October, 2009

H: Sermon 20: What is Man?

