

On knowing your place

Mat 24: 1-14

Prayer: O God, take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire for you and for your Kingdom's sake. AMEN.

Preparing a sermon this week has been a challenge. I have had St Francis, Creation and the Gospel all going around in my head.

So, to start with St Francis.

Francis is the saint we celebrate today and is probably the most famous one of the second Christian millennium, and I suspect also the one we need most to listen to today. He was not a priest, but a modestly educated lay person who started a revolution against the grandeur and power of the Roman Catholic church. He dramatically rejected the luxurious lifestyle of his family and dedicated himself to poverty, vowing to follow Christ, who was gentle and humble of heart, in every way possible. Francis exemplified humility, resisting the formal structure of a religious order others wanted him to establish and the power that would have given him as its leader. He refused to establish a home or a steady source of income for himself and his brother friars, saying that Christ had nowhere to lay his head; that Christ depended on the goodness of others; and that what was good enough for Jesus was good enough for him; you might say he practised extreme Christianity!

It was his radicality that shocks but also captures us; He was not a bland middle of the road person!

I wonder what Francis would have said of our world today. Our modern culture is steeped in materialism and consumerism like his; he began as the dilettante, son of a wealthy merchant. Yet when we look at Francis as he became, we see an image of Jesus. It reminds us that folks in our time need to look at us and also see an image of Jesus, and it prods us with the knowledge that we might be inadequate images indeed, but like Francis, we must be the best we, and the Spirit within us, can be.

Over time, Francis realized that what Jesus wanted from him was to renew the Church and rebuild it by bringing people to a deep and authentic encounter with the crucified and risen Lord. And that is just what Francis did in his time and what we are called to do in ours.

So, the example of poverty – not destitution – of Francis is a gift to the modern age. An age where we find ourselves saturated with stuff, with electronics and bling and video games and websites that distract us themselves, and have attractive distractions embedded right inside each page that takes us to other distractions that do absolutely nothing to make us better. We are surrounded with aural and visual noise that makes it impossible to hear the still, calm, quiet voice of the Holy Spirit. Francis reminds us that everything that is not of Our Lord is chaff being blown by the secular wind, chaff that binds us and chokes us. Chaff that the enemy uses to keep us from seeing and testifying to the joy of ultimate Beauty. How are we to find the time and discipline to develop that space and in it dive into the depths of the reality of God?

On the revitalisation of the church, he never *argued* anyone *into* the Gospel. He walked *toward* the person while everyone else walked away: the leper, the enemy combatant or the outcast, and he let that encounter do the preaching. Again, a challenge from Francis as we interact and move amongst people in our wider world.

But then as I said at the beginning, I also needed also to take account of today's readings.

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus tells the chief priest and elders a parable about some tenants who make disastrous decisions — decisions rooted in greed, arrogance, disrespect, and selfishness. They wanted to *own* the vineyard! A landowner, Jesus says, lovingly planted a vineyard, leased it to some tenants, and travelled to another country. When harvest time came, the landowner sent his servants to the vineyard to collect his share of the produce. But the tenants seized the servants and ultimately his son. When the tenants saw the heir of the vineyard approaching, they decided to murder him and claim his inheritance. So, they seized him, and took his life.

Jesus concludes the parable with a question for the chief priests and the elders: "*When the landowner returns to his vineyard, what will he do to those tenants?*"

At the heart of this parable, though, is a distinction that I think speaks very pointedly to our current environmental crisis. What the tenants in the story neglect to understand — or very deliberately choose to ignore — is that they were *stewards* rather than *owners* of the vineyard. When the landowner asks for his rightful share of the harvest, the tenants take

offense. As if the vineyard should belong to them, and it is the landowner who is in the wrong for making a claim on the land at all. Somewhere along the way, the tenants have forgotten their place. Their standing in relationship to both the land and the landowner. To put it bluntly, they have forgotten that they own nothing — *nothing at all*. Everything belongs to the landowner. Theirs is not a vocation of ownership; it is a vocation of caring, tending, safeguarding, cultivating, and protecting — on behalf of another.

It's worth noting here that Jesus does not describe the evildoers in the story as thieves or marauders. They are not outsiders — they are the landowner's trusted tenants. He *chose* them and granted them creative license to steward the vineyard for the benefit of all. How much more tragic, then, when they abuse the landowner's trust so cruelly.

And finally, Creation.

We find ourselves with a continent to care for and a Christian heritage that we now understand to teach us that it is not ours, but we are to care for it as good stewards.

We need to remind ourselves:

We do not 'own' our properties.

Farmers do not 'own' their properties.

Miners do not 'own' their properties.

Government agencies, for example National Parks rangers, State forestry foresters, do not 'own' their properties.

The Australian nation does not 'own' the continent.

Green peace, or the UN do not 'own' the planet.

As St Francis reminds us: *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it!*
(Ps 21:1)

In the light of all this it is interesting to look at the latter stages of Francis's life. The work had been a great success and a huge number came to join him in the work. But this required organisation and management skills. Individuals with different personalities and backgrounds to Francis, and he finally stepped back from the highly successful movement he had started. Even Francis we discover, was simply an ordinary mortal, just like us. It took a team of different people

with different attributes to carry the work forward. Even today Roman and Anglican Franciscans carry on the work. In fact, they are leaders in the western church in promoting proper stewardship of creation.

In a parallel way, it is interesting that the work of repairing creation over much of Australia is being carried out by the combination of Aboriginal Rangers and scientists working together as teams. It seems a strange mixture, doesn't it? But the two groups, coming from different origins have a deep and spiritual desire to heal the land. Together they provide the combination of skills needed in much of our land.

It seems, as we have learnt over the past few weeks from Paul that the work of Christ needs many different hands and voices. If we are, like Francis, to renew the Church and rebuild it by bringing people to a deep and authentic encounter with the crucified and risen Lord we need to take the skills of each of us and combine them.

Inspired by Francis and his followers, and by the efforts of Aboriginal Rangers and scientists, we must join with those we are to work with, within and beyond our parish to do the work of Christ here in west Belconnen. Let us each set time apart to listen to what God wants of us and to be adventurous and give it go!