

In Commemoration of St Francis of Assisi on the 800th Anniversary of His Death

4th October 2026

Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3.7-14

This weekend marks the eight-hundredth anniversary of the death of St Francis of Assisi, someone who had so completely modelled his own life on that of Jesus Christ that he was known as an '*alter Christus*' – 'another Christ'.

In his youth, Francis had been a wealthy and well-connected young man. The evidence suggests that he enjoyed life to the full, and was capable of a kind of boastful arrogance, maybe tinged with a hint of bullying towards others: he is not someone in whom one would have thought there the makings of a great saint. In that sense, Francis represents every one of us.

During Francis' lifetime there was, and had been, a longstanding and continuous rivalry between his own city, Assisi, and the city of Perugia, across the next valley. Sometimes this might have manifested itself in the way that football violence can erupt between the supporters of different towns' teams: but there were other occasions when full-blown armed conflict between the two cities. We know that Francis was injured and captured by the Perugians, and spent some time imprisoned in Perugia as a hostage. Did he suffer from something like PTSD? Some of his later behaviour, which could be peculiar, and his self-expression which became very blunt and direct, may be explained by such a diagnosis. Certainly, he



began to experience himself as a misfit in the society of the day. Perhaps he had encountered a fear that had changed him. He began to look *into* himself, to seek isolation and solitude. In the midst of all this there were undoubted elements of conversion, although the Church – and ordinary Church people – didn't know what to make of him, and some were very sceptical. Francis began to live in the simplest possible clothes, sometimes reduced to complete rags, and an embarrassment to some of his neighbours:

he began to help out in some of the run-down churches in the valley underneath Assisi – and it was in one of these, whilst Francis was making some repairs, that he received a vision from Jesus Christ who gave him the charge to '*rebuild my Church*'.

Imagine how we would respond if someone, clearly affected by violence and trauma, installed themselves in one of *our* churches and told us that God had instructed them to rebuild the Church altogether – not only the buildings, but the very soul of the people, the whole household of God: to lead a kind of *revival*. How would we respond? It might not be with unbridled delight.

Francis was lucky in that there were some – but by no means all – among the churchmen of his city who felt able to sponsor him in this new life; he was fortunate to have a bishop who authorized him to live officially as a kind of hermit. Devoting himself completely to the service of God, and living in profound simplicity of life, dependent solely on what others gave him, Francis developed a pattern of life which is marked by an absolute commitment to practise the values of the Gospel, an espousal of 'Lady Poverty' (whom Francis understood to be his bride), trusting in the providence of God to sustain him, just as all the other creatures of the earth do. It is from this self-offering in lowliness among the other lowly beings that emerges Francis' sense of delight in nature, and in the whole Creation of God, his sense of profound *fellowship* with other creatures, human or animal (or even mineral). More and more, Francis experienced this simple and humble pattern of life as one which is sustained

specifically by *God's Love*. It is for love that Francis can bear all other things (cf 1 Corinthians 13.7). The love of God, commitment to Holy Poverty (cf Matthew 19.21, '*If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor*') – self-offering for the sake of others (cf Philippians 2.5-11) – and delight in the Creation of God, and all the signs within it of the touch of God: these became the hallmarks of Francis' spirituality, and they were hugely attractive in a world that had become jaded in the face of so much of the self-serving and half-baked Christianity with which it was more familiar. Instead, Francis' own life and example became a *living sermon* by which the Gospel was *made real* in Francis' own day and age. The evidence suggests that Francis himself would have preferred the simplicity of life as a kind of spiritual solitary, but he was joined by fast-growing numbers of other young men who became 'Franciscans' – and whose ordered pattern of life according to the rules of poverty, chastity, and obedience continues in the world today.

St Francis inspires us to take the Gospel sufficiently seriously that its words *come to life* within us. He inspires us to *practise what we preach*. In particular, his sense of intimate kinship with the other creatures and indeed the elements of the earth speaks of a powerful honouring of the reflection of God's character in and through the creation itself, cherishing – not abusing or taking for granted – all that God has made. With the author of Genesis, he looks at it all and sees that, '*indeed, it is very good*' (Genesis 1.31). But there is also a vivid sense of the love of God, sometimes clarified only in and through our experience of *suffering*: like St Paul, Francis experiences Jesus' *wounds* as the means by which our own wounds are healed. Consequently his spirituality is very much one of compassion, of long-suffering for the sake of others, and of love. He is full of *thanksgiving*, come what may.

As we give thanks for St Francis at this 800th anniversary of his death, may that same commitment to the Gospel, that same openness to love and compassion, and that same honouring of God's Creation and of all who share it with us, take ever stronger root within us, that we, too, may help rebuild Christ's Church, and participate in the work of God by which all may yet be made new (cf Revelation 21.5).

The crucifix, now in the Basilica di Santa Chiara in Assisi, is the one before which Francis heard the voice of Jesus prompting him to 'rebuild my Church'.

