

Franciscan Dream.

If we are serious about ourselves we can start from a solid and sure foundation: if at this moment - *now* - you opt to be with God intimately - if you are serious about Jesus Christ and everything he means, then your life has already been successful; and because your life is a whole - the way you have lived your past, all of it... is the way you arrived here - give thanks for all of your life, all of it... the good and the not so good! You are where you are meant to be - *to know God and Jesus whom he has sent.*

It took me a long time to realise that, as regards God, I am in a position of strength, not weakness. I was taught that I am weak and helpless, in need of salvation... and this is true, most certainly, that is who I am - as I see me!

There is another view... the me which God sees. God loves me. Stay with that for a moment. There are no qualifications attached to that. 3 statements - God loves, will never stop, and loves me exactly as I am! I was told as a child that if I didn't stop doing this or that, God would not love me anymore. That is outrageous. The value of love is that is free, without condition. Whether or not I benefit from love is up to me. Am I concerned to become the lovely person God made possible when I was gifted with life?

Let us see if we can focus on this one necessary thing!

On La Verna Francis prayed all night long - *who are you Lord, and who am I?* A question Jesus never had to ask! He knows 2 things - he knows God as Abba, and himself as the beloved of Abba. This is who Jesus is, and his mission is identical with it. Jesus did not come with a message from God, he is the message - he offers, as St. John tells us - *to all who believe him he gave power* - what Power?

To become adult children of the Father - to have the awareness of God which Jesus has, to *know* God as Abba, and to know oneself as the *beloved* of Abba. This is his mission - and when this is present there is the Kingdom, when creation is as it was meant to be - able to make the Lord present.

What made St. Francis different was the way he picked this up - *Francis, my friar...* for the moment forget the rest, forget the rebuilding programme, and hear what set Francis back on his heels - *Francis, my friar...* there is the dream, there is the charism, if you like there is the mission statement!

He accepted what he heard and spent his live trying to become what he had accepted. As the Eternal Word became flesh in Jesus, God's own self-awareness, God's self-giving in Jesus the Christ, so Jesus became incarnate in Francis through his accepting this fraternal relationship, which showed him God as Abba, and himself as the beloved of Abba. This was the challenge - accepting the offer of brotherhood with Jesus and so a filial relationship with Abba.

What Happened next? He struggled! First, trying to take it in for himself, and then trying to let everyone else know - who didn't seem to care! How could he share his God with his world? He

spoke, he prayed, he taught... he got frustrated. He looked at Jesus intently, trying to see what he did about it.

That was when he discovered that he was speaking the wrong language - he was all the while speaking the language of conviction... but he needed to learn the language of value, how to be present to another to enrich them, to leave them better for his having been there. He saw clearly in Jesus that God only speaks one language - the language of Incarnation - the Word became flesh; not humanity - but down-to-earth flesh.

Christ did not talk about fraternity; he didn't give courses on brotherhood... he was there *being brother*. St. Francis realised that the only place his God and his world could meet was in him - accepting the invitation from Christ to be brother, and being this brother for everyone else, without exception. Remember that lovely expression he used when speaking to the Sultan at Damietta? The Muslim's were accustomed to hear the Church inveigh against them as the *spawn of the Devil*, but here is one who calls them *my brothers, the sons of Ishmael*. Since that time this option has been picked up variously - sadly, too many see in it a soft, romantic reality.

Our culture would base relationships on degrees of friendship - ranging from nodding acquaintance to full intimacy. But there are two kinds of friendship. There is the gift of God whereby we feel drawn to some people rather than others. We like some, we do not like others. And that is fine. This is the friendship of preference which has a huge role to play in adding quality to life. But it can never be the friendship on which Gospel belonging rests. You cannot base a community on likes and dislikes.

Jesus spoke of another kind of friendship which is specifically designed for this purpose. *I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything the Father has told me*. What has Abba told me about you? Am I aware that he has said anything??? Have I bothered to listen?

Here we have the challenge of the contemplative centre of our life. To be with the Word and to hear that God is Abba, and that I am the beloved of Abba, must tell me that this is also true of you... irrespective of how I may see you. An indicator of my personal conversion is whether this makes a difference to me! This is what happened to St. Francis in his encounter with the leper. What he heard changed his attitude to his neighbour.

Everything became sweetness and light - we must understand this properly. The revulsion, the nausea, the stench all remained, but now there is a new dimension. He was shown that there is a very real difference between leper and leprosy, and one has an urgent priority over the other. This is the foundation of community life, the heart of Franciscan living - never the fickle and partial *I'm OK with you because I can get on with you* - but a realisation that no matter what I see or feel, there is a reality there before ever I knew you, or you knew of it.

We belong from our very first moments - i.e. if *Abba* makes any difference! I am no closer to Brother Christ than I am to Brother *whoever*. Francis rejoiced in the discovery of the difference between leper and leprosy - the way God sees the difference between sin and sinner.

See this as romantic! No way! This is no easy option. Yet only when the reality of that is beginning to make a difference to me will I become unthreatening - an ordinary guy who is trying to do ordinary things, extraordinarily well. This is what we have to offer the Church and the World - we have nothing else! *The acceptance of the offered gift to live fraternally enough that it shows and invites*

This is what *being Church* means. When did the Church become necessary? Jesus did not come to found a new religion - he didn't even come initially to found the Church, he came to establish the Kingdom, and to this end he gave us the ability *to be Church*. He came with the invitation to intimacy - *to know God as Abba, and ourselves as beloved of Abba*. He was rejected. But the Word will not return to the Father without achieving its purpose. This is when the Church became necessary.

The invitation has to be presented to every generation, in the way it was presented in Jesus Christ. How did he make the Father known? Not by talking about it! But by being himself - his Father's son. And to all who take on this responsibility - *to all who believe, he gave power to become adult children of Abba* - so that all may know the one true God through Jesus whom he has sent. Jesus Christ remains handicapped without our hands and feet, dumb without our voice, unimpressive without the quality of our presence wherever we are! *I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything Abba has told me about you.*

The only way Jesus proclaims the Kingdom is through the quality of his relationships, the genuineness of his presence. In him there is no distinction between who he is and what he does. This is the import of the power of the Spirit. Jesus told us that the work of the Spirit is to call to mind *everything I have said* - and precisely because there is no distinction between self and word, wherever we discover the Word we discover the Lord.

Jesus has that terrifying detachment to be able to say to people - *what would you have me do for you?* He was present with no other agenda than the well-being of the other! He is present to them in such manner that they know not just that God is Abba for him, but for them too.

If Jesus Christ is to be met in the streets - which was what Francis did for his people - it will happen for Franciscans only *through being brother* - and no amount of words can ever claim this. If I am to know my fraternity, I need to turn to those who live with me! *Who do you say I am?* If I had the courage to ask, would I have the humility to listen? *Let them show their needs to one another!*

How did we get from *that* to *this*? Something so spontaneously refreshing and intuitive - to something institutional and somewhat predictable?

I started my Franciscan life with some dreams, maybe much of it fanciful - but real for me. Whatever the bits and pieces there was an underlying attraction to the kind of living in which real people mattered - I am not sure when that attraction to *something* became an attraction to *someone*.

What I am seeing more and more in St. Francis is how he became more and more aware of how persons - not just people - are to God. Remember those word so Isaias - *I have called you*

by your name, you are mine - and eventually the same writer says - *I have called you by my name, you are mine!* Beloved of Abba. So much so that he was able to make the completion of the leap in faith - not simply *I believe in God*, but *God believes in me* - *and you!* Living that, sharing that, being urgent about that - is the Franciscan charism - realised through *being brother* in friar Christ.

St. Francis sees this as the *Poverty of God* - he was drawn and caught up in a specific way of attraction to Jesus Christ - first, that all of this would have happened, had he been the only one in need; and second, that though the world is teeming with the presence of God, evoking experiences like awe, grandeur, wonder, majesty, simplicity, spectacular... it is only in the human heart that this God can be known *intimately*.

The more I own this, the more I try to clothe this with myself, so much more will you discover through me how much you mean to God. Why the *Poverty of God*? Because God no longer *owns anything*. It has all been given away in Jesus Christ - who is here for us, who will not go away from us, even when we feel we should nail him to a cross! Literally, *do with me what you will*.

Do we still own this charism or have we put something together for ourselves? The heart of St. Francis's life is Jesus Christ, God-with-us fraternally. You will never find St. Francis referring to this as *Religious Life!* or *Vowed Life!* The Gospel was not a document for him, the Gospel is Jesus, not a record of past events. Real presence is of the essence of his life - *keep nothing of yourselves for yourselves, but give yourselves totally to him who gave himself to you, totally* - the challenge to respond to the poverty of God with having nothing of our own.

Do not see St. Francis's attitude to poverty as the downward spiral many would paint. So many proclaim that St. Francis wanted nothing... not true! Both before and after his conversion he wanted *everything*. The difference conversion made was to identify *who is everything!* Through his encounter with the leper, backed up by the invitation of the voice from the cross, he realised that everything is being offered to him in Jesus Christ - a relationship.

Such was his ardour that he desired literally everything, and anything less than everything became an obstacle - all good things, but in no way do the myriads of gifts come anywhere near the intimacy the Giver offers. We cannot be genuine brothers of Francis of Assisi without the intimacy only arrived at through such vibrant poverty.

Jesus became poor so that we might be made rich; a very helpful guideline for us! Who is being enriched - name them - by the way I live the Gospel? Who is enriched by my PCO? To know God as Abba - through the way I live as the beloved of Abba - who has received that through me? Franciscan living is essentially filial.

Like me, you too have said two things about yourselves: 1] to live a life *shaped* by the Gospel. 2] You choose to do this after the manner of St. Francis. There is an *is* and an *ought* in all of us. How I live and how I said I would live; and both are under my control. No one forced me, I have freely chosen. We know that responsible living means making sure I can deliver what I offer. I have said I want to give everything - am I sufficiently in charge of everything so as to

give it, and to honour the giving? The place of personal discipline! What does the word say to you? Bleak! Lent! It should convey enthusiasm - the art of the disciple.

Tell-tale signs are useful here. The intrusion of routine, predictability etc... Has orthodoxy replaced intimacy, instead of enhancing it? Are we trying to offer Christianity without Christ Joe Chinnici has written an excellent article published in the Cord, in which he tells us, head-on, we must let St. Francis die! As long as we cling to talking about him as though he has responsibility for the Order today, we can hide behind stories and history - and descend into an unattractive inertia.

Am I concerned about letting the *is* and the *ought* of my life coincide? An ordinary man, trying to do ordinary things, extraordinarily well? I need the courage to have a genuine look why and how Jesus Christ lived - to possess himself fully in order to give himself fully away. I cannot give what I do not have - my offer of fraternity to my brethren stands or falls by this. For example - as Minister I have to make decisions about brethren which can seriously affect them, and often this might be based on what I know about them - what place is there for my brethren to have a say about me because of what they know of me - without genuine community?

St. Francis's asceticism was extraordinary. Allowing for the fact that he overstepped the mark, yet his motivation is sound: he doesn't tell us that we should be ascetics, that we should do this or that - as ever his urging is personal, and he would never intrude - he says simply *as the Lord has shown me, may he also show you!* Which he certainly will - but am I in a way of life which offers him a hearing? To be i/c of everything that is me, in order to honour my word when I give myself totally, is the work of a life-time. But whether I progress depends on how much I want it to happen.

The action of the Spirit is to make what is proper to being human capable of equal intimacy with God. St. Francis saw this exemplified in the Mother of God: *Mary is what God would be in all of us!* She was made able to present the world with its Saviour, and in his Letter to the Faithful St. Francis reminds us that we too are mothers of the Lord, all of us - for *we have conceived in word and sacrament, what remains is for us to bring him to birth by the way we live. Let your life happen according to the Word!*

The spiritual life is not an obstacle course and cannot be urged solely through law and precept, rather is it the given ability to know the Lord precisely through the way we live. In no way can a lover settle for *enough love* ... easy to say! How often have I said - *that's it - no more - enough is enough!* Hebrews 6.17 reminds us that the *essence* of Grace is the gift always to experience *something more* - *with us in mind God promised something more.* Not bigger and better, but deeper and deeper. God is essentially *more love, unchangingly always new.*

For anyone with the task of affirming and animating the besetting question is always - how can I get and keep that *fire in the belly* which is the hall mark of genuine cherishing. This is not a construct of my own making. It can only be received freely as gift, the fruit of the kind of

listening on which intimacy depends. We are renowned for not listening! We actually seem to believe that we know what's best for us, *I know my limits!* How wrong that is!

Have we forgotten that it is not for us to decide what is good? Only God is good. As Franciscans *goodness* is very much our focus - goodness is *reality relished and cherished through the experiences of relating*. Truth is reality relished by the mind.

There is an important factor here - when I *think me*, I go out from myself, I look at myself as an object of knowledge. Whereas when I *love me* I delight in being me, in touch with the me God created. The point: when I try to make you into what *I understand* about you; rather when I love you I not only *allow* you to be yourself, but actively rejoice in the experience, I respect the real you.

My *willing* needs the guidance of my *thinking*. When our Order lost this priority it did so because it overstressed a narrow understanding of poverty, ending up doctrinaire and fragmented. St. Francis focused on *Abba* and so discovered what/who everything, everyone truly is. Only God is good and *of his goodness we have all received* - Jn.1.16.

His writings help us recognise the signs of the spirit of self and the spirit of God. Since Vat.II there have been many changes, but not much change! A lot of *self-investment*, but not nearly as much *self-involvement*. The one constructed to bring everything to me, the other to give me away.

The difference between the two is our charism. Test it: an accident happens, my instinct *to save* is triggered instantly, to go and help before any other conditioning has a chance to impede, before my self-centred baggage can take over [*If I stop I will miss my train*] This is today's malaise, sadly ensuring that there has to be crisis levels before action is allowed free rein. Our charism is to show by the way we live together that goodness can be the *normal shape - forma vitae* - of life, with or without crises.

This is something we are converted to, we cannot decide to do it at Chapters! It is the first-fruit of accepting how God sees me! The fruit of contemplation. Look at that over-valued word *availability!* What use is my *availability* to you if, for whatever reason, you cannot ask me for help? We need to focus on *anticipation* - something not possible without attentive listening to sounds and silences.

It was GKC who said though St. Francis life was dramatic, it was no drama! His relationship with the Lord was totally in the Spirit, through the working of Grace - he accepted the experience of knowing God loved him. He had his dark times. On La Verna he went through darkness, believing that he was the only person in creation who would be condemned to hell, and that this was just and proper! Conversion liberated him from seeing things from his own perspective - he celebrated by writing the Canticle. His decision-making-base changed - producing a situation naturally at variance with what remains unredeemed.

This is why St. Francis sees us as an Order of Penance, because he realised the *cost* of living by a different decision-making process about self-donation in contrast to self-investment. Everything is turned upside down. No longer does he sit down and plan what would suit him

best, now he is open to be lured by one who obviously has his total well-being at heart. Being a *forgiven-sinner* carries 3 elements: i] *changed living* indicating real sorrow and regret - Ad.24. ii] The *helping hand* offered through the Sacrament of Reconciliation - RNB.20; RB.7. iii] A new heart, in that my decisions emerge from a new value system, which allows my God-given instinct to save - no matter what the cost, free rein - Testament. This allows those who live with me, who work with me, who help me, who meet me, to realise how good *they* are.

When St. Francis let-go of his ownership of creation, he believed simply that this was the appropriate thing to do - *let-go!* What he didn't realise was that precisely because of letting-go, everything now came back to him in a new relationship, formerly impeded. He saw everything now in terms of his fraternal relationship with the Word, his filial relationship with God - and so he said the whole world is his friary, the place where brothers and sisters live, no matter how they saw themselves.

On all who act in this manner and persevere therein, the Spirit will rest making a dwelling there. they will be children of Abba, spouses, brothers and mothers of the Lord... mothers because we have conceived through Word and Sacrament, now we must bring him to birth by the way we live!

Only in surrendering my ownership of so many *gifts*, including my own self, will I appreciate the freshness and challenging freedom of the Poverty of God... and stop playing games! But am I bothered about all this? Poverty, normally implies a bad material state. We do not profess to live in destitution. So, what do I mean?

There is an experience, conspicuous by its absence for so many today, which speaks eloquently of genuine Gospel Poverty - call it Gospel Equality! No longer are we creatures of the Creator - that is our perspective - we are adult children of Abba: *Whoever is in Christ is a new creation... There is neither Jew nor Gentile... You are all one in Christ* - Gal.3.28.

In the Incarnation God became other than God, identifying with us - *equal, but not the same* - 1Cor.12.4. Jesus is sinless, not because he is God - there is no connection between divinity and sin - Jesus is sinless because he is truly human. Sin makes me less than human - if you cannot ask those you have sinned against, reflect on how it felt for others to sin against you!

Being sinless did not remove the ambiguity we are accustomed to from Jesus's life. A sin-filled world impacted on him as it does on us. A sin-filled world drove him to Calvary - Jesus is equal to us in experiencing the effects of sin, yet not the same as we are in being himself sinless.

We are *personalised* through relationships, we share a common humanity in unique ways, we are equal, but not the same. Gospel Equality means no apartheid - of any kind! No inequality. Our differences are the raw material for communion - as in God 3 are equal but not the same, yet totally one - we are called forward *into unity through diversity*. When I relate to you I bring with me everything already *related* to me.

Just so, through the Incarnation Jesus brings with him everything already *related* to him. *The Spirit will make clear to everything I have said!* In accepting friar Christ I am being offered awareness of God as Abba, in his Spirit. I can know God as Christ knows him - his by nature,

mine by grace - equal, but not the same. 2Cor.8.13. reminds us how Christ emptied himself, so that we might be filled-full - Gospel Equality. *I do not mean that others should be eased and that you should be burdened, but that as a matter of equality your present abundance should supply their want... that there may be equality - as it is written: who gathered much had nothing over; who gathered little had no lack!*

It was always the intention of the Word to become flesh - to become part of creation - not a necessity occasioned by our very real need for redemption. The Word came helpless and dependent, as do we. He was born and he died naked. He grew up in a family - learned a trade - was not rich, but not destitute. For the greater part of his public life he was itinerant. The implication of *foxes have holes...* is compelling.

God is not at home with his own people! He came specifically to them, and they did not want him. As he *left* the divinity so that we might enter into it, he also left home so that we could know all about this. He makes special reference to the poor, not simply because they have no power in their own regard, but because to be of the Kingdom means working for universal access to freedom from all fear and oppression - that is what the Kingdom is. It is hypocritical, as NT tells us, to inveigh against the unjustly imprisoned - and they are legion - without confronting those who carry the keys [Friar Benny Baisas confronting Marcos - the wolf of Gubbio!].

The Kingdom bestows the *right* on those who have not, to receive from those who have. The Kingdom is *now*, or it isn't there at all. We are not called to promise the Kingdom, but to uncover the Kingdom brought in Christ. All are equal with Jesus, none are the same as the first-born - God does not make copies!

Justice with Peace is felt - else it is not real. It is not just situations which need change - rearranging the furniture - it is structures that are responsible. Kingdom values do not allow oppression of any kind to go unchallenged. Don't look in a dictionary for what *oppression* means - let courage, enable the oppressed to speak for themselves. You might be shocked to hear where some of the sounds come from!

The Kingdom happens wherever equality is guaranteed because differences are respected. There is a direct connection between personal attitudes, peace with justice, and the tendency to turn a blind eye to Institutional oppression - because it *has always been there*. Remember, opposing Institutional oppression is costly - as Jesus discovered.

Help is not properly brought to the helpless simply by doling out from our abundance, but through changing the structures which, up to now, have made it impossible for the many to have something, because the few have taken everything. This brings the shadow of the cross - because only when those who have everything will be content to have less, will those who have nothing have the chance to get something. This crucified Jesus - literally.

While the condition of the rich is precarious, tempting them to make idols of wealth, Salvation for them does not mean destitution, but generosity, an openness to Beatitude values. The rich young man in Mark 10 lacked but one thing - the Kingdom was on offer to him - *Jesus looked at him and loved him* - but he could not live with the implications of Kingdom justice - the

justice that seeks to eradicate poverty through equality - and remember that impoverishment is at many levels.

If we are content to accept today's standards, we should really carry a health warning! Our lives will be a living contradiction of our words, giving tacit approval to a shape of living which is going nowhere. *Consumerism* creates artificial wants which uncritical living become *needs*! Possessiveness is the obstacle, not because it is bad, but because we cannot handle it justly and with impartial equality.

Impoverishment is not confined to the materials of life... it spreads into wherever there are genuinely human experiences: spiritual, emotional, moral... Evangelical equality does have an advantage over custom-made systems - for one who relishes equality there is the lure of total freedom: *to be there for others*, and it is alluring because it emanates from *knowing* that my lowliness, emptiness is assured. I am deliberately created empty so as to be filled-full: *if you say go in peace and God go with you, without giving what is needed - what is the point? Faith like that, without action is useless.* 2Jas.15.

All of my life is held within the Word - Jesus is not just the Saviour through whom I return to God, my life also came out from God - *in creating me god gave me to myself...* I come out from God in birth. I return to God in death - and the bit in between is the *opportunity* for me to own this experience - to clothe with me the potential God created. *Made in God's image* shows! *God is love* - i.e. not one, not two but three; and these qualities are evident in all of us. The mutuality in God shows us *how* we belong. There is no apartheid in God. You cannot be *of God* without being genuinely poor.

Because community is central to Revelation, it is of the essence of Christian living. Community differs vastly from common interest groupings - or from convenience living. Recall draper's beautiful rendering of the Canticle - and getting it completely wrong! [*no mention of sister/brother*] Our community living is often exposed to the same vandalism if it bears no resemblance to fraternity!

St. Francis's vision of creation included himself, seeing how everything makes sense only within the context of friar Christ. This gift of living opens wide when lived fraternally, without discrimination. Yehudi Menuhin said of children - *they are born old, and then become young!* We are born the unimpeded product of thousands of years of human experience - then we are exposed to *new* ways and ideas. St. Francis's conversion put him in touch with where he was from, and he found out where he should be going, and he claimed it and named it - *Our Father, who art in Heaven...* he discovered and relished what it meant to become as old as a child.

He found so much goodness because he looked for it! It is not for us to invent goodness, but to uncover the potential for it, and set each other free to pursue it. The major shift in his life was away from the experience of power into the power of experience. *Power-over* destroys freedom, it neither needs nor bothers to seek consent. It is the language of the bully. St. Francis had no power - but what authority! *Franciscan authority* issues directly from the desire to set

people free from their past!!! This results from realising how everything *belongs*. Creative relationships allow good things to happen to other people; *creativity* means *more being*, and increase of experiencing the relish for *something more*. No place here for hidden agendas or other products of fearful living.

If only we knew what is going on deep-down inside! The journey towards personal integration will lead us through a valley of many challenges, and surprisingly, all of them in a proper order - no matter what our conscious self would wish to address. That is - if we are honestly concerned about integrity. Granted that premise, then my desire for honesty will face me gently with my many dependencies.

Such is the story of the *Talents*. The one talent that was buried because of fear is simply the gift of our own life. Jesus declared this to be his mission - *I have come to bring life in abundance - to set free*. Personal liberation is not just accepting myself, but accepting that I am a unique, unrepeatably, highly significant, infinitely cherished and eternally desired integral part of creation, which would be incomplete without me!

This is not going to happen on life's surface. There are rules! It starts - and ends - by accepting reality, openness to the fact that there is a reality independent of my living experience, but which can be enriched by it. For St. Francis this meant not just fidelity to God's Word, but with an equal ardour *to know God's meaning of God's Word*! This is why he appreciated contemplation in a specific way. Not for him the clinically clean *looking at God*, but ever the challenging *looking at God who is looking at me - and delights in what he sees*! For this to be real I need to let go of whatever - and I mean whatever - impedes God's meaning becoming my meaning.

Here we have the inner heart of St. Francis's Gospel Poverty. Though honoured as the *Poverello* never imagine for a moment that he was so devoid of sensitivity as to desire nothing. His conversion focuses around a crucial change. St. Francis wanted everything, and went on wanting everything especially after his conversion - but now he realised that only God is everything, and that anything less than everything was getting in the way. Giving thanks for so many *anythings* he surrendered the gifts in order to embrace the Giver.

Like the good Lord before him, he discovered that he needed no human weaponry because he had nothing to defend. He had that *itineracy* in life which allowed him to be open to the greater reality, and not be detained within his own agendas - no matter how laudable such might appear. Such simplicity prevents us becoming limited, partial even... experiencing the need to be somewhere else instead of being there for the other so fully as to let the needs of the other decide my presence or absence.

Before ever prayer means saying something it means being someone - it is nothing other than the simple courtesy of giving God an attentive hearing [*obedience*], open to receive the Word and the meaning of the Word. *It is the Spirit who will make clear to you everything I have said*¹ The dynamic of this is of the essence of prayer. Because there is no discrepancy in Jesus

¹ John 14.26.

between who he is and what he says, in recalling his words the Spirit makes the Lord present, to anyone who would welcome him *as he comes*.

But we are not very good at this are we? Look at the quality of our listening to each other - our need to edit, filter or even reject...! The word that is you can only become a relationship between us when offered to me if I receive it as it is spoken! Quite often this will mean letting go of so many of my prejudices, blocks, defences...

Does it matter how God sees God and me? Does it matter that Christ is as eager to wash my tired feet as he was for his disciples? Will I let him? Do I believe that God loves me exactly as I am? Do I believe that my sin, so very real, while ever coarsening my capacity for sensitivity to God, never removes God from me?

Why did his friends ask Jesus to teach them to pray? As Jews they would be well and truly taught, and expected to pray daily. They saw him praying! They were entranced by what they saw. They saw something of what it means to know God as *Abba* and to be loved consciously by Abba. In giving us the *Our Father*... he is giving us access into a 2-way relationship: accepting who God is for us, and, in consequence, who we should be for each other. Much more than a passive experience, it asks us to become the *Amen* to this prayer, our *yes* to want to become who God is showing us we can be.

What a head start Franciscans should have in celebrating this year of *Abba*! We have access to all reality already established by the Creator who is *ours*, we must allow this to find birth through us by the way we live it. It is only through fidelity to prayer like this, dipping deeper below the surface, that we will have chance of transcending all the surface realities - and they are real - which would not only keep us away from each other, but which would insist that this the way things must continue to be.

The malaise of our world is more of a spiritual nature than anything else. We have lost touch with where we come from, and so not only do we not know where we are going, we are destined to travel alone because we are disconnected from the only experience that binds us together. Once before the world *was growing cold* - so said the Church when it honoured St. Francis as a saint. What about the world inhabited by Franciscans? Are we allowing the big freeze?

Where prayer is authentic, the focus is on God as God is, since it is not we who pray but the Spirit praying in us, then we know this is real, and is happening, as *Romans* says, in *God's own language*² In his Letter to the Faithful, St. Francis reminds us to remember that *we are the mothers of the Lord, because we have conceived through Word and Sacrament, what remains is that we bring him to birth by the way we live*.

It is not the role of prayer simply to show us how to relax, or be rid of stress: prayer is allowing God access to me - unimpeded, and, as a direct fruit of this, enabling me to become what I am being offered. This is where the valley of challenge opens up - being gently held and confronted with any and everything from prejudices to dependencies which are getting in the

² Rom. 8.26.

way of this incarnation: *I will listen to what the Lord God has to say, the voice that speaks of peace*³.

The disciples simply saw Jesus being himself, the beloved of Abba; and so did Celano write of Francis, that *he did not so much pray as become, himself, a prayer*. Prayer means entering into the reality of a relationship so powerfully, that coming away from it Christ could even walk the road to Calvary.

Please God, for all of us, there are people who matter enough for us to leave our own priorities and agendas in our concern for their ongoing well-being. Such experiences are never interruptions, because of where they come from, they are instinctive priorities: sheer joy and the good fortune of another, heartbreak at their distress... whatever it is it is *now a part of me* and not just an attitude to be appropriately adopted. Prayer, first and foremost is to persuade me first and above all else that I and my ongoing well-being form such a part of God. The response to such prayer, as the *Prodigal* discovered, was staggeringly simple - to let God be my *Abba*.

Eucharist pre-eminently the summons to remember. But how do you remember something you have never known? To remember someone special requires no stimulus, other than the presence which has lived itself into us and which memory makes permanent.

How do we remember in the Eucharist? Without the dynamism vitality of an experience of real presence is it possible to remember and not simply be passive observers of a ritual?

More than likely the disciples, after Good Friday, told stories, shared memories, even visited places - to remember.

Jesus gives us the Eucharist precisely to become the way we remember - because it is real presence, celebrated in such manner as to allow us to be really and truly present to the once and once only offering of himself - *this is my body, given for you, my blood poured out*. All accomplished through his death and resurrection, an experience too profound for words, too mysterious for symbol.

Theology assures us that we touch and remember through Grace. Whilst this is unquestionably true, are we any the wiser?

Eucharist transcends every area of experience, it cannot be captured, pre-eminently here do we believe far more than we understand. But we must approach the Eucharist as we approach a person who is special, not an event to which we are invited, but a presence which has its own environment of sensitivity and attentiveness.

Sadly, we take for granted that human quality which is specifically given and well-suited to such an experience, our ability to be fascinated in which we do not try to grasp something as find ourselves already caught up by it. Eucharist is the invitation to become intensely aware of being held close by God and to know it, and to feel compelled to share it.

³ Ps. 85.8.

This is why the symbol proper to Eucharistic celebration should be respected: bread for hungry people. Never forget that the human experience which unites me creatively with food is hunger.

Hunger is a problem for the Western world and so becomes an evil for the rest. Our world does not know hunger for what it is. Maybe having more than enough has jaded us. We have the regular option of missing a meal without giving it a thought. There is no such thing as meal times for the hungry, simply the need to eat. When hunger is abused, the proper environment for eating - eating together - is lost through the compulsive fear which drives me to grab for myself, just in case there is not enough.

Hunger is a blessing, it is a gift of God. It is good precisely because along with hunger God gave us so many wonderful ways of satisfying it. Abandoning the way of Grace for sin separated the two - another example of what God has joined together... whilst there is more than enough for all the hunger in the world, there is not nearly enough for the greed of simply one person.

Hunger is special because it intrudes, it stops us and reminds us that we are in need of something which we neglect at our peril. It only becomes a menace when the means of satisfying it are not as freely available as the hunger itself.

Hunger engages the whole person. There is no point in seeking to interest hungry people in anything other than food. But hunger is infinitely wider than food and drink. It widens out into every aspect of human need: for warmth, protection, companionship, affirmation, affection, reconciliation... *It is in this total sense that Jesus offers himself as the bread of life.*

Wherever the means for satisfying hunger are either missing or deliberately withheld, hunger will brutalise, reducing persons to conditions less than human. The only deliverance from hunger is either eating or dying. We seldom satisfy hunger directly from nature. There is the need for sowing, reaping, marketing, buying, presenting... and eating, especially eating together. Eating together has many functions, but should always contain [grace] an element of celebration for everything that contributed to this occasion.

We seek to get rid of hunger in vain, nor should we if we could. Rather must "*our hunger be assured*" through *daily bread*. In places where food is still harvested immediately before eating, where water has to be carried and kindling foraged, everyone appreciates that the satisfying of needs require cooperative effort.

Where there is independence there is little awareness of the lot of others, of where "it" all comes from [*from the fridge!*]. There is no appreciation of effort, no gratitude for the *creative love* we have reflected upon.

Creative love brings dignity, its presence alerts me to the truth that I really am worth bothering about. This is the abundant living Jesus brought. God is nothing other than creative love. Creation is the way God communicates all that is God with all that is not. Most especially is this so with the Incarnation, and which is prolonged through history in the Eucharist - the creatively abundant response to total human hunger.

The preacher says "*we do not live by bread alone*", but only the hungry can say "*I need bread*". So, how is Jesus this bread? One becomes sustenance for another in rescuing the other from meaningless living, *whatever that might take*.

Prayer: The ecological problem reflects inner human problems of alienation and selfishness. We are alienated from ourselves and this alienates us from the rest of creation. Self-alienation is only overcome through personal integration and self-acceptance, and there will be no self-acceptance until we realise that we are acceptable to God. This we cannot do unless we listen, and hear and believe what we are hearing, i.e. we need to be contemplative.

Prayer shows us that we belong to this world in all its staggering and wonderful complexity. It is our home. We are not isolated individuals, nor is there a vacuum between one person and the next, nor between a human being and the air we breathe, or between a flower and a child. The self does not terminate at the surface of the skin, it continues out to the furthest reaches of space.

Homo sapiens is more than of the earth, rather of the universe. St. Francis was *homo universalis*, who had united himself to all reality, so that there was no separation in him between the inner and the outer man; no longer was there any in-here and out-there, simply a communion that banished all estrangement.

Francis the contemplative loves creation for what it is, water is loved for itself, not for what it contains or what we can do with it, but because it is a creature like himself; water was his sister. It is far from normal to pour toxic waste into your sister! It is abnormal and completely immoral to assemble parts of creation and hurl them back at creation in the form of deadly bullets and lethal bombs. We abuse creation whenever we fashion it as a means of destruction, which is simply dividing a house against itself. What we fashion from creation is for the service and well-being of all creatures.

Advocating the practice of daily prayer is not setting up an escapism into an idealistic world. Prayer is a highly political activity, because it reveals the precise relationship which exists between God and individuals, which has obvious repercussions on society. To know God as *Abba* and ourselves as *the Beloved of Abba* [which is Jesus's mission] rules out all privatisation from religion.

Prayer reveals that we cannot shirk responsibility for the injustices in our world. Our trivialising of evil is shown up in all its shabbiness and absurdity. Serious sin really lies in our neutrality, inactivity, our silence in the presence of evil, violence and abuse. Prayer uncovers what we have repressed, especially our share in the collective guilt for the exploitation and alienation in parts of creation. We really do know in our heart of hearts that none of us is an island.

In prayer we find out that our intercessions for the poor, the lonely and the oppressed are in fact commands for us to get up and do something for them. Intercessory prayer is always a summons to action. There is an intimate relationship between contemplation and action. We

cannot in all conscience call God Father and remain silent in the abuse of so many brothers and sisters, animate or otherwise. Contemplation for St. Francis was closely linked to washing the disfigured bodies of lepers around Assisi, and must always be tied in with efforts to establish peace with justice.

In its tiniest detail creation spoke a word to St. Francis, this is why he told us we should be obedient [listen] to all the beasts and wild animals. *Obedience* is derived from the Latin *obedire*, which means not simply to listen, but *to listen attentively*. Whoever listens attentively will always hear a word addressed to them, a word calling for a response, a response that carries responsibility *you become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose.* [The Little Prince].

St. Francis's response in love and reverence to creation in its many forms marks him out as one of the most mature human beings ever to have lived. Everything was endowed with a dignity and value peculiar to itself, which forbade him even to think of dominating anything, because that would be to enslave it. He was a man of peace, and this was no mere platitude, but the consequence of an inner life at peace with itself, with God and with the world. Outer peace is impossible without inner peace. So it is that he added a verse onto *The Cantic* on pardon and forgiveness.

It is not necessary for everyone to write poetry, but our world has no chance *without people who pray*. There is no one in the whole world who has not received the call from the inner depths to the mystery of unity and harmony. The *Cantic of Brother Sun* is simply a summary of one who heeded and responded to that call. This call is gift offered to all without distinction of sex, race, colour or creed.

St. Francis, it may be said, belonged to another world, one we cannot recapture. But it is not the world view of the Middle Ages that we want to retrieve, but Francis's belief in universal brother/sister-hood. He was full of surprises. It might be startling to hear him call poverty his lady, but shocking to hear him refer to death as sister: *Be praised my Lord, for sister bodily death* - a strange sentiment to modern ears. But then an attitude to death is the reflection of an attitude to life. Because we have cheapened life we, inevitably, make death unintelligible.

He valued life so much that he knew by instinct that it does not slip away into nothingness in death. He loved all God's creatures without exception, and love has *eternity* written into it. What lover is indifferent to the suggestion that love might come to an end? Indeed, how did *always* and *forever* demand a place in our language?

Poverty and death belonged together in his life. Death was much more than something passive to be endured. It was the final act of surrender, the last sacrament of total poverty. He had given his life completely to Christ, so that it could not be taken away from him. Hence he did not fear that death could rob him of anything.

Death's ambiguity was removed for him because of the integration of the outer and the inner man. Sister death became his companion through life, not in any morbid sense, but in response to the claim of Scripture that *no one can see the face of God and live*, if death allows him to see the face of God then *welcome, sister bodily death*.

In his encounter with God, Francis learned that God is eternal and we are temporal. In God there is neither past nor future; nor does God pass from one state to another. God did not begin nor can God cease to be. He saw himself by contrast as temporal, mortal, finite, a being defined *by becoming*. He exists from a past, through the present, ever open to a future, yet we are made in the image and likeness of God. The likeness we have lost through sin, we do not live *like* God. We can never lose being in the image of God, no matter how hard we might try.

Human beings do not have a purely natural end. We are created, to live forever. But we are created mortal, and so it cannot be an imperfection for something, mortal by nature, to die. When St. Paul reminds us that the *wages of sin is death*, he is not saying that *had there been no sin there would have been no death*. He is showing how the impact of sin has robbed us of the integrated experience of death as the gateway into the very life of God.

If we are destined to live forever, then death which seems to end life, must play a crucial role in this transformation, and Jesus Christ explains how: *greater love than this no one has, than to give your life for another*. From the ultimate in disintegration the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus shows death to be the pinnacle of love, whose essential quality is that it is eternal.

St. Francis helps us live peacefully with each other, with God who is *Abba* and with the whole of creation that comes from the Creative Word, the Word who addressed Francis as *my brother*. It is as simple yet as profound as that. If the Word, through whom everything claims its being, regards Francis as his brother, then everything that is related to the Word already has that kinship with him. Indeed, he said that *the whole world was his friary, the place where sisters and brothers live*.

Be clear about the Poverty Francis loved and lived. It was never negatively inspired, never an attempt to see how much he could do without. It is not correct to say that St. Francis wanted nothing. On the contrary, he wanted everything.

But his conversion taught him first that God is everything, God alone is holy [whole], and second that anything less than everything becomes an impediment. He always gave thanks to God for all the gifts showered upon us, *he would never allow his renunciation of them to become denunciation*. He simply and gratefully surrendered his right to share the good things of life so that the gifts would never distract him from his commitment to the Giver.

His poverty was shaped by his love for Christ, his brother, and nothing else. Here is found the affirmation of the being and the dignity of every creature: *Creatures must be loved, but only as the creatures of God and in the spirit of poverty, which forbids love ever to become a desire for possession* [Louis Lavelle].

Unlike the poverty which is the evil scourge of the Third World, one which enslaves, Francis's poverty is *liberating because it is freely chosen*. It dispelled fear from his heart, because now he had nothing to defend, and it liberated all other creatures in his presence. With fear removed, all creation becomes his friary. Love forbade him to possess anything. this led him towards his lady poverty. From this came freedom, wonder and an ever deeper sense of the universal belonging of all creation.

Being obsessed with amassing possessions and then burdened with the worry of keeping and protecting them breeds fear and suspicion, for though riches are powerful they are also precarious. The love which gives birth to poverty accepts, affirms and serves others. It has no ulterior motive, it has nothing to defend and so dispels fear and generates peace with joy.

There is a close relationship between freely embracing poverty and loving those who are born into it or reduced to it. This love does not counsel them to be resigned to their lot. On the contrary, it shows them its injustice and strives to wipe it from the face of the earth, by teaching the poor to work to improve their condition, and by committing oneself to restore power to the powerless.

The poor have no power over the vital situations that affect their lives. Economic injustice and the ecological crisis are related, symptoms of spiritual malaise. The spiritual answer is that love which inspires the sacrifice involved in freely embracing poverty. This is how St. Francis acquired his sense of unity and solidarity with the rest of creation. *Praise and bless the Lord of the universe, and give thanks and serve with great humility!*

We are limited persons, we come out of a past, through a present and on into a future... or do we? Are we not tempted to pitch our tent somewhere on the way and settle for what we have achieved... and so betray *today* by depriving it of looking towards *tomorrow*!

I have an ever-increasing past, moving from one state to another, never fully present to myself - there is much, much more to all of us than the present moment, and whenever I decide to halt my pilgrimage, that is where I remain - incomplete! For my death to be fruitful and welcome as a sister, I must clothe it with all of my life-lived. I am born mortal, yet destined for eternal life, so the only way into this is through the quality of my dying! Sound familiar? *Greater love...*

By contrast, there is no becoming in God, no past, present or future... how can we bridge this gap? Some refer to God as the Supreme Being, Light, and Truth... For the believer there is only one answer - God is Jesus from Nazareth - not that God is *like* this man, as some have said, but this man is God! The baby lying in the straw, utterly dependent... is the Lord of Creation. A boy who was taught his prayers, who learned how to shape wood... this is God. The man who crawled on the ground in a sweat of blood and anguished horror, who knew what the experience of the absence of God felt like, who was executed as a criminal - this is the Lord of Creation. There is literally nothing that can keep our God away from us.

People who looked at God simply saw a tired man resting in a boat, a thirsty man at a well looking for a drink, a man weeping in distress for his city and its people... would *you* have believed?

To recap: In OT we see God, as it were, from the outside - revealed through actions, discerned in wisdom... It is only with the NT that we have access to God from the inside. The mystery of *what it means to be God* has become the *mystery of what it means to be human*. Notice, there was no fear in the Shepherds, babies don't frighten people; there was no fear in Mary, John and Magdalen on Calvary - a dying person so deeply loved doesn't frighten.

Duns Scotus reminds us that God's free and eternal will was to have one who is - to use a phrase - *outside* God who could receive God's love totally and respond worthily - thank God Franciscans can put to flight the sad expression - *O happy fault...* Whilst sin determines the manner of the Incarnation, its eternal purpose remains God's desire to share all that is God with all that isn't!

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