

Can we live the Gospel?

Francis is universally known for all kinds of reasons – he certainly has one of the largest bibliographies. What is it about him that attracts people of all faiths and none? He wasn't an orator or a miracle worker. I believe that when people hear what he said, and see what he did they come to realise – *I could do that!*

It is more his ordinariness than anything extraordinary that seems to resonate. Whatever it is, his seductive power is as strong today as in C13. But if this is so – why is the Order that carries his name seemingly in decline? Could it be the tendency *to live by interpretations, instead of by what he actually said and did?*

His original intent was not to found an Order – he simply wanted to live a God-centred life, as he saw it after being shown the way. This way was obviously attractive, since others simply wanted to be with him – he was later to write: *The Lord gave me brethren...* He was never totally content with what he had founded – and during his life-time gave up the role of founder, to try to recapture his earlier enthusiasm.

There is something to be said for this, for *anyone* seeking to live a Gospel life. It became apparent that the disciples of Jesus had to have their initial faith in him taken away; to be replaced – *not by their faith in him, but by his faith in them.* The interplay between the believer and the object of belief is crucial – I can discover Jesus Christ and elect to follow what I am seeing and what I am believing – *do it my way.* Or I can surrender to letting myself be led – *Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert.* This is *the way* – and it brings together, as one whole not just *where I am going*, but gradually opens me up *to discover who I really am.*

Notice how often Jesus says, after people wonder what they think he has done to them, *it is your faith that has done this* – not that you believe in God, but *you delight in believing God believes in you.* Notice, his frustration in his home town: *he could do nothing there because of their lack of faith.* Can we say with the joy conviction brings – not simply *I believe in God*, but *God believes in me?*

For some, Francis appeals through his naiveté, his simplicity and poetic gifts, as a free human being, without possessiveness and with an alluring interest in the well-being of others – an interest that aroused reciprocal responses. His way of life encouraged freedom without coercive power or the need to own.

This flowed from his total belief in equality – and for him that included everything that issued from the creative love of God – he spoke of the world being his friary, the place where sisters and brothers live – from the smallest atom to the highest mountain – since all owe origin to the one Father.

The Church in his day, not unlike today's Church, had become *established*, and in many ways reflected the established religion. St Paul was dedicated to upholding the God-given Law of Moses, and saw anyone contravening the Law as hostile and to be hounded down. This he did vigorously, believing he was doing the work of God.

How could the Law of God become a means of persecution and death? It started as observing the Law of God, and deteriorated into observing interpretations of the Law – and this is the virus we all face. What started as the simple rule of Francis became interpretations, a kind of deterioration. Francis was well aware of the parlous state of the Church in his day, but he didn't leave it, even when it stood far away from the Gospel he professed.

For Francis, the Word of God was not a book or a law, *it was a person who was relating to him*, and his enthusiasm [literally] was to maintain and deepen this relationship and by making it primary, and ever more intense, the rest simply happened. Not for him was the ever-increasing volume of words, resolutions and documents – he simply intensified his quest – *who are you, Lord, and who am I?* This highlights the need to be constantly aware of the distinction between the charism of Francis and the Franciscan charism.

Where we should begin and remain, is the crucial place of a personal relationship – uniquely personal, no copies – with the living Word of God, and have this permeate to allow us also to be led by the self-same Spirit that led Jesus – even to Calvary!

Francis was in love – and lived as lovers lived – completely *given* to the reality of the other, and not to any interpretation. In writing his Testament he actually counsels us to accept it *sine glossa!* His parting words to his brethren say the same – *as the Lord has shown me what it is mine to do, may he show you what it is yours to do*. It is arguable that the rot set in when his original rule – a collection of Scripture texts was rejected as being uncanonical. Scripture is not enough!

What is involved in accepting and knowing Jesus as Friar Christ? Many have asked how he could endure the isolation of months on end he spent in mountain hermitages. The answer lies in his understanding of Gospel Poverty – as a means, never an end. His way of life was never to see how poor he could be, but how free!

With nothing to detain him, he had the freedom to be with his heart's desire – the love of his life – he was never alone and isolated on those mountain tops. This was his life – how can such value, such intimacy become a common way of life other than by each singly and communally accepting the ever present invitation from Jesus Christ – *come and see* – and then learn to respect what each has discovered, by saying yes, with a respect that leaves no room for exclusive individualism?

How did it actually start for him? He didn't write very much – but what he has left us is clear and concise; if we would know him we must resist the ever-present temptation to be content with knowing about him. What is crucial to the experiences of lovers – God did not just create thinkers, God created lovers – to relish the new way of living such experiences offer, never can it be a second-hand experience.

Recall the Samaritan woman meeting Jesus. She was so on fire with what was happening to her that she had to share it with the neighbours, who go and see for themselves. They come back to thank her and say thank-you for telling us *but now we believe because we have met him ourselves*.

Over the centuries Formation Programmes for Religious Life inevitably became institutionalised – it is the only way we know how to pass on what is of value. But there has to be respect for what is always a means never an end. So institutional did things become, that we arrived at a *one size fits all* situation; which did not overtly seek to override personal uniqueness, yet ended up doing just that. Reflections on Vatican II, helped resolve this

My own novitiate fraternity was made up 6 or 7 men straight out of school alongside a similar number just back from fighting the Second World War – and we suddenly became *the novices*, following a one-size-fits-all process.

It *seemed* as though what was uppermost was what was *external* – with scant attention to what was happening *inside*. When searching in faith is overtaken by observance alone, the result is inevitably predictability. It is like waking up in one house, eating in another and going to bed in a third and not seeing much difference apart from the externals. Predictability has nothing whatever to do with God, who is unchangingly always new.

It is a similar situation when we enthrone availability as a community virtue. How often do we hear when a crisis explodes – *didn't he/she know we were all available?* Availability is a good thing, but never enough on its own. If someone has to ask for help – even knowing, we are available – and can't do so, either through shame or embarrassment or whatever – I might be truly available a thousand miles away.

Availability comes into its own when preceded by anticipation – when we can see, hear things are not well, but which need time-for and presence-with, so much is said in silence than in words. But for this to happen, anticipation has to have priority – we need to pray often *Lord, keep me out of your way.*

Francis' insistence and persistence on the one thing necessary - to be with God in work and play and to let nothing impede the working of the Holy Spirit; permitting work, as long as it did not distract from this one necessary thing, which has also led some to make misguided comparisons.

Francis' love for God has been termed infatuation by some, like having access to one's favourite pastime or meal every day. This overlooks something fundamental. Because his being with God *was by invitation and not of his own initiative* he was present to the one true God, through Jesus whom he has sent; the God who is unchangingly always new – in whom there is no repetition.

Francis never tried to recover today what he discovered yesterday. It is not unlike what lovers experience who say over and over again: *I love you* without ever repeating themselves. Love doesn't start with the expression *I love you*. This expression erupts from what has been inwardly building up until *the very stones cry out... this is who I am becoming because of you... please go on being you for me.*

We often have pet names for those we are fond of, names which suggest intimacy. When another presumes to use this name, simply because he/she has heard it used, causes upset because what gives rise to the name – *the intimacy of relationship* – is missing. Which is why simply repeating what we hear prayerful people pray, thinking we will have the same experience, is to be very much mistaken.

When we pray: *O Lord, open our lips...* what are we asking? Do we presume to know what happens next? Francis urges reflection on the parable of the seed falling on different kinds of earth. It is not so much identifying which one is me, as realising that all of them can be me, with the need for me to be still and let myself be known by God – instead of trying to know God my way.

Francis exhorts *in that love which is God... put away every attachment...* he is reminding us to let God-be-God for me rather than letting me be me for God. He writes in the Admonitions [10] a reminder that *selfishness, the foremost enemy is within my heart.*

This is why he insists so much on the importance of inner freedom – like inner silence. It is reasonably easy to quieten and turn down external noise, but this is but the prelude to attend to all the inner sounds of anxiety, hope, fear... some legitimate in their own right, but having no place in a heart turning to God – *be still and know.*

It is easier to live superficially, than to live with a heart completely open to receive – to welcome the presence of God who has promised to make his home within. Francis' insistence on such a contemplative way has earned him, from some, the name austere; almost suggesting a killjoy attitude. We need to pause and see here the behaviour of the lover seeking above all else his heart's desire.

The clue lies in that word desire – my experience of initial formation started with explanations of what this new life expected from me; I heard about fraternity, and about living the Gospel

counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience; I was expected to become accustomed to *living to an order of the day*... and many other things.

What I subsequently discovered was that this one-size-fits-all approach didn't help me discover what was going on inside me – which is essentially different for each individual. To be grounded in understanding poverty, chastity and obedience was a good and useful exercise; but it was like being expected to climb the stairs from half-way up.

It now seems to me that without such discernment, I could be led into thinking I was destined to live a *vowed life* – a horrendous thought. The purpose, the only purpose of Gospel living, is to lead to intimacy with God, who desires to be with me, just as I am. But this can only happen if I have the heart for it – if I can eventually say *this is what I long for with all my heart* as Francis proclaimed when he had the Gospel explained to him at the start of his conversion. Only then would I see the Gospel Counsels as necessary means, not ends

There has to be a priority for discernment before all else if we are to live a life of intimacy and not just observance. The language Francis uses for such living has been seen by some as somewhat over the top – take for example: *you are good, you are all good, you are the supreme good, and you are every good* – we could be tempted to say *OK, we get the message!* For him there was no sense of repetition, simply the exuberance which is literally known as *enthusiasm* – literally to have God within.

Contrary to what many say, Francis' experience is *God-focussed*, not just Christ-focussed. His life and his prayer is truly Trinitarian. Jesus and the Spirit do figure largely in his prayer – with Jesus as mediator and the Spirit the vitality that leads to Abba. This is to pray with a pure heart, a heart turned to God rather than through an abstract vocabulary, and in this way come to *experience* and relish the reality of Gospel living – and not just talk about it. Francis prayed in such fashion that he obviously *knew the Shepherd*. This is apparent from his life – it was clear that he was never on his own.

Poverty is seldom understood in the sense that we would like it to be understood. Now, there is an ambiguous statement! Are we genuinely concerned about the quality of our Gospel poverty, or are we covertly hoping that people will not ask too many awkward questions about us? "Poverty" usually implies a bad material state, lacking the basic necessities of life and, in extreme cases, it implies destitution. How we use words to describe ourselves is significant [symbolic].

There is need for the absence of ambiguity and the presence of whatever contributes to clarity and relevance. We use the term poverty to describe an aspect of our lives which, by any standards, has a degree of comfort and not a little security. There is nothing wrong with that; but it gets cloudy when we use the same word to describe the millions in Asia, South America and elsewhere; we use the same word to describe the situation of the people of Somalia and drought-stricken Africa.

This causes confusion among people hearing the same word to describe both. I am not for a moment suggesting that this is how we should be living, but let us say what we mean and remove the confusion, especially from the understanding of those who wish to embrace our life. Listening to the expressions of such confusion, we appear to be left with alternatives: either make the word credible - doing away with the need to interpret the word every time we have to use it, or use another word.

There is not much chance of the former - nor would it be appropriate, so what about changing the word? Not as a way out of an awkward spot, but as a better way to describe who we are, and what we are actually about. I believe we are actually using the wrong word.

The term *Evangelical Equality* is not mine, but I do favour it strongly, for this reason. The principles upon which modern democracies are established are generally enunciated in terms

like: peace, justice and the pursuits of liberty. Which are simply articulations of the Sermon on the Mount.

Equally, there is a parity with the Gospel Counsels. Obedience implies the freedom of the children of God, since it is Truth that sets us free. Poverty, holding everything in common in order to be sure that no one was in need. Chastity the quality of the relationship; sisterhood and brotherhood with the brethren of Christ.

Evangelical Equality is that form of existence which results directly from being *in Christ* and of *the Kingdom*. *In Christ* we are no longer creatures of the Creator, but children of the Father: *If anyone is in Christ, such a person is a new creation; the old has passed away, the new is come There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus – 2Cor.5.17.*

Jesus' primary concern was to proclaim the Kingdom, all else is subordinate to that. The Gospels proclaim that God's reign is inaugurated in the person and the ministry of Jesus: *the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven – Heb.12.23*. Within the Kingdom there is no second class, everyone is first-born. God has no grandchildren. In God it is equality, not sameness; unity, not uniformity; diversity, not division. All reality, therefore, has its origin in an eternal giving and receiving in love and an eternal giving back and receiving back in love.

Jesus is the Word made flesh, the Word who became other than God, identifying himself with a new way of being, equal to us but not the same. Sin makes us less than human and can destroy our humanity. Being sinless far from distracting from humanity, is the very condition of it reaching its fullness.

Being without sin did not make Jesus' life any less surrounded by ambiguity than it was for sinners. Sin-filled worldliness, in contrast to God-filled worldliness, impacted upon him just as much as on us; and even more so, because of his acute sensitivity. A sin-filled world brought him to the cross. Being sinless means that he never confirmed human sinfulness in himself by a free act. Jesus in sharing with us is equal to us, being the Word made flesh he is different, equal but not the same.

We are persons largely through our relationships, we share a common humanity in different ways - we are equal, but we are not the same. When we enter into an intimate relationship, we bring to it the richness we already enjoy with other friends. In every new relationship friends are brought into a network of relationships to which each one already belongs.

Through the Incarnation we have been introduced into the relationships Jesus has with the Father and the Spirit. We share equally with him, though not in the same way. What Jesus is by nature we are able to become through grace. We are equal, but not the same. *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich he became poor for your sake, so that you might be enriched – 2Cor.8.9.*

We have become more than we are by nature - evidence of the activity of the Spirit. Through his claiming equality with us, which is the divine poverty, [and all that this implied], we have become rich, equal to him, but not the same. *I do not mean that others should be eased and you should be burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written: He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack – 2Cor.8.14.*

It was always the intention for the Word to become flesh, to become part of creation; the Incarnation was not a necessity brought about by our need for Redemption. The Word entered our world helpless and totally dependent, as we do. A helpless child clinging to a human breast. The Word was born naked in a stable and died naked on a cross. He grew

within a family, learned a trade. He was not rich, but neither was he destitute; he enjoyed economic security for most of his life.

Most of his public life was lived as an itinerant preacher. There is no evidence of destitution or that he begged for alms. The group had a common purse. They did not appear to be in need and they certainly gave alms to the poor. The actual symbolism of *foxes have holes*, is strong. The Messiah is not at home in Israel. He came to his own people and they did not want him. Just as he "left" the divine life so that we might be enriched by it, so too does he leave home in order to proclaim the universality of the kingdom.

He makes particular mention of the poor, of all who are marginalised. He preaches the Gospel to them not just because they have no power of their own [and are likely to be more disposed to help offered], but because "kingdom" means the real presence and total availability of compassion, healing, reconciliation and the active promoting of the well-being of each other.

The excluded have the advantage of not being tainted by the corrupt system. In the Kingdom those who have-not, have the right to expect support and affirmation from those who have. The Kingdom proclaims our equality before God, without discrimination, one with Jesus the first-born.

Justice with peace has to be felt, not simply talked about; situations do not simply need altering, it is structures which require change. Where there is the Kingdom, oppression cannot go unchallenged. Where there is the claim that the principles of the Kingdom have a priority, there the poor can rightly expect not to be left in want.

The Kingdom is *Christ present*, and Christ has shown us how the Kingdom happens, when God became equal to us, but not the same. The Kingdom proclaims equality under God, without discrimination: what Jesus is by nature we are by Grace - we are equal, but not the same.

This calls for justice to be tangible, and all oppressions must cease. This will only happen when it is appreciated that there is a necessary connection between personal attitudes to justice and the tolerance of unjust structures which have crept into Institution. There can be no justice with peace, wherever there is tolerance of any form of injustice.

Help is not properly brought to the helpless simply by doling out from abundance; rather by making sure that structures are changed in such ways as to allow the poor access to the ability to provide their own abundance. This is where the shadow of the cross becomes discernible, since in order for those who have nothing to be able to have something, those who have more will have to have less. This is why Jesus was crucified, because he dared to preach the plight of the poor in the places of the rich.

S. Luke writes that the lot of the poor is a blessed one; not because there is any virtue in impoverishment, but because so many have accepted the Good News of the Kingdom - and they actually mean what they say!!! Which is that the first priority is to make sure that nobody goes in want! This is the conscience clause which should summon us constantly - just think of how many actually subscribe to the Christian Gospel - more than enough to obliterate destitution forever. But Jesus warned us about our attitudes: "you will always have the poor with you".

There was a shift in emphasis in OT meaning of "anawim", from being in a deprived social condition to a state of humbling oneself before the Lord. Our normal understanding of the word "poor" - a bad social condition - makes it impossible to appreciate it as having a spiritual and a religious significance. However, whilst the condition of the rich can be precarious, in as much as they can be tempted to make idols of wealth, yet Salvation for

them, does not consist in making themselves destitute, but in opening themselves, through grace to the lot of the poor and sharing with them. We are all less than human for as long as any human beings suffer from poverty, hardship and sickness.

The Rich Young Man in Mk.10. lacked only one thing: *Go, sell what you have and give to the poor... and come and follow me.* The Kingdom was on offer to this man, a good man and Jesus loved him. But he was not in the Kingdom, the obstacle was that he could not accept the kind of Justice God's reign brings. There is no suggestion that the Kingdom involves destitution that is the whole point, the Kingdom insists that there should be no destitution, and the means to eradicate it is for those who have to share. He went away *sad!*

The Acts of the Apostles shows clearly that the early Church had problems with this. Yet there is one text which has something to tell us: *And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions, so that no one was in need.* Nobody was made materially poor.

All were equal in that no one suffered want. There is no teaching that says that poverty or need is virtuous. It is a scourge to be eradicated wherever it is to be found. In the text already quoted - 2Cor.8.13, the Corinthians were being asked to deprive themselves for the sake of others. Deprivation is not a virtue, but a means of alleviating human need and a positive attempt to eliminate poverty.

What is involved in Evangelical Equality? Openness to God, to incorporate a life of prayer and the spiritual meaning of poverty: *Blessed are the poor in spirit.* This follows from the Doctrine of Creation, which teaches us that God is the Sovereign Lord of life and death, God is the origin, centre and goal of reality. We exist because God wills it. The ultimate reason for our existence is not to be found within ourselves but within God. To recognise this is to surrender self to God, recognising that as creatures of the one God we are all equal in the sight of God. At the end of the game – bishop and pawn go in the same box!

We are finite, under the power of evil. Our limits tell us that we are mortal, and out of this we know an anxiety about our existence - as we did not always exist, so we might not continue to be. In its turn anxiety gives way to the temptation to refuse to accept our humanity with its inbuilt limits, radical emptiness along with a simultaneous longing for fullness.

This prompts us to build idols in place of the true God, even to make gods of ourselves. This is the fruit of the power of evil, whose power can only be broken by the reign of God. Belief in God the Creator, tells us that our being is gift, and that the appropriate response to gift is gratitude. Such thanks is made best of all through the Eucharist, in which Jesus Christ is at once the most wondrous gift of God to us and our highest expression of gratitude to God.

It is our Faith that through the Incarnation God is Saviour and Redeemer, the one who Sanctifies through accepting our humanity unconditionally, thus making it possible for us to live by the same Spirit of God. Gospel Equality proclaims that all is given, and thus is every community is thereby constituted a community of affirmation, adoration and thanksgiving: Affirmation: by accepting creature-hood with serenity and peace; Adoration: thanking God for being God; Thanksgiving: for the gift of Jesus Christ.

We live in times of protest and confrontation; and whilst such terms hint at something aggressive, is it possible to view them differently? Currently they suggest a critique of the status quo which is being experienced as some way oppressive and excluding, and suggests alternative and inclusive alternatives.

What I'm getting at is: *was Francis' attitude confronting his experience of Church? Was he setting up a protest movement?* There is no doubt he was a loyal son of the Church, which is

why he sought to return – not to the good old days – but to the original and uncluttered charisma.

Francis was at once neither a rebel nor a silent witness, rather was he a challenge. He was a mystic – totally turned towards God and God's presence in history through Jesus of Nazareth – for him, the Gospel – was neither texts nor moral codes, but a person, Jesus risen who spoke to him as his friar.

Perfectly aware of the situation in the Church of his day, he never disconnected Christ from where he has chosen to manifest himself, the Church. What was new about Francis was the way he integrated Christ and Church seeing the signs of the times as crucial for this harmony.

Francis was middle class, dreaming of social advancement, fascinated by the Crusades – and was graced with finding the Gospel within all this. It is easy to see how someone with that pedigree would appear confrontational to the official Church, which had become Institution, inclined to rely on law and ritual. For a Church in this state the uncluttered living of the Gospel could appear as a step too far.

Francis has great respect for the need we have for structures – as long as structure clearly served life and not vice versa; the life which is the liberating Word – Jesus Christ. What is surprising is that the Church at its most official best did not dismiss him. His life was radical, but like his friar Christ, was totally without power: *All the brothers without exception are forbidden to wield power or authority, particularly over one another.*

With empty hands and nothing to defend there was no need for armament – his true poverty. This set him free to serve in every situation except where one becomes master. Serving in ways that are respectful of others, no matter what their convictions, was for him the meaning of *blessed are the poor in spirit.*

His understanding is holistic in that it includes renunciation of spiritual domination alongside the material. Faithful to the Gospel, he sees no father figure [authority figure] other than *our Father who art in Heaven...* His fraternity will know no father-son relationships, since all are brothers. Such an understanding does not exclude the ministry of unity, but every time such authority is used it must carry health warnings about the temptations to power games. Authority is a service ministry – the ministers should be the first servants of the brothers, hence the name minister and not superior – willing to wash the feet of his brothers.

Rejecting of power-over, belongs in all relationships, even when expressing disagreements over life style; no judging or condemning; no quarrelling or contentious ways – this was an issue at that time when the Church regarded the itinerant poor as an embarrassment – and spoke of our Moslem brethren as the spawn of Satan [*Francis addressed the Sultan as my brother, son of Ishmael*]. Sending his brothers among non-believers he reminded them of their first duty – *respect the God who was there before you came*; learn from structures already in place [*learn the language etc.*]. It is easy to see how such an understanding would not sit well with a Church intent on military crusades.

The contemporary Church had virtually achieved identity between authority in the Church with civil authority, and saw the exercise of material power as serving the Gospel [reminiscent of S Paul's early life serving the Law]. The presence of this poor man, poet and prophet, truly a man of God could prove dangerous to such a system. His presence is all the more radical in that it was without offence and innocent.

But there was a problem within the Church too – were these friars to be classified as priests or monks, or were they laymen? Francis brought a new freedom, consumed as he was by the freedom the Gospel affords, the freedom that has no other purpose than to become a way of life that sets people free. The Church hesitated – much as it is doing with Pope Francis – who

is intent on seeing the Church's priority as liberating from oppression – *he came to his people to set them free*. This is a head-on challenge, a wake-up call to the current inertia.

Francis' early life was in a time of conflict between the waning of military dominance and the rise of the new merchant class; and he was involved in the occupation of public buildings [Rocca Assisi] and in local warfare [Perugia] in pursuit of his desire to become a knight.

The Gospel changed all this; and he found himself more and more on the margins of society – in the thick of it all he retained his natural freedom, and was moving closer to the outcasts of society than he was to the power-brokers. Along with his companions he created an almost impossible world. Society was embroiled in class struggle, and Church recruitment was from the upper classes, Francis assembled a mosaic of noblemen, peasants, poets and the unlettered – all desiring to seek to *love one another as I have loved you*. They were peace-makers not just peace-lovers. This was a challenge to contemporary society.

Whilst this does qualify as protest you will search in vain for signs of criticism, threats or violent gestures towards Church or State. Their protest was simply to live a human life differently. Francis did not break with the Church, but lives within it differently. He doesn't point the finger at the rich but makes himself poor, and lives in a way in which blaming and retaliating makes no sense. There was no attempt to undermine, or root out. It was like the proverbial new shoot springing from old roots. It was a life-lived not just words spoken. Nothing was truly destroyed that has not been refreshingly replaced. Again today within the Church many voices seek a hearing, rejecting structures that are not life-serving and seeking for renewal – from within the Church.

What did *within the Church* mean for Francis? Paradoxical as it seems, all he was asking was to take the Gospel seriously. This disturbed many people. All he was asking was to stop looking up to heaven and take responsibility for sister mother earth – the first calling for a Christian is that of the Gospel. To stand before the Word of God with ready heart and hands in silent praise and thanksgiving.

The vital connection between Jesus the Good News, and those needing to hear it, is the heart and soul commitment of those asked to do simply that. Francis was silently asking does the church have to use the power tools cherished by society? Presented as an ideology it withers like every Utopian dream; but lived as a prophetic witness it proves indispensable for Gospel living.

If society is rejecting paternalism, a community of brothers or sisters who are equal with none superior, is the aspiration of people today. Every Church community is obliged to strive to be such; enough to evoke once more – *see how they care for each other*. No one denies the need for a minimum of structure, but more and more are feeling the oppression of overkill. The space left for freedom is becoming less and less.

Francis sought and succeeded to set in place a belonging in freedom, respectful of others and without provocation; only because it was a community founded on mutual love and respect – no cry of rejection, but of belonging; no protest but proclaiming – not to destroy what is failing but lift up and sustain. [What a sad state we have reached today when by the far the main reason for brethren leaving is loneliness!].

Francis was a loyal non-conformist. In our world of consumerism, a community that knows how to live simply and modestly will be seen as out of step – non-conforming. Yet within it there is evident freedom. Today's working folk are being made more and more slaves of industry, an impersonal ant hill where everything is predetermined.

Francis lived this reality differently – without violence or criticism, or identifying with any class; he brought a sense of freedom – *I could do that* – to a world dying from taking itself

too seriously. His call was to non-conformity in pursuit of what is not yet but is on the way – our God who was, is and always will be.

Did he found an Order?

The obvious answer would seem to be yes. Yet history reveals him as a solitary figure, dramatically sealed by the Stigmata. He certainly attracted followers, but the radical Gospel project he wanted to live with his followers failed. He certainly succeeded in incarnating the Gospel so splendidly – but has he left a permanent mark on religious life in the Church?

Historians suggest he assembled an informal group of interested folk, from which, through pressure from the Church, groups of men's and women's orders emerged. There is no basis for this in the Sources – in fact these Sources suggest that Francis, along with his brothers, drew up a religious way of life; though this was frequently diluted by inner resistance from the brothers as well as a moderating influence by the Church.

Friars and Monks: Monastic life is a way of total Christian living – it is not a plan of action or service. Those committing to it are not usually clerics. In the heart of the Church they create a new way of community living. The separation from the world – *fuga mundi* – consists of different facets from hermit living to the full-blown monastic life. Though usually confined within the monastery, they were also found outside. Irish monks brought Christianity to the British Isles, and into Europe.

The implanting of faith in the Anglo-Saxon world was due to Benedictine monks. But the crucial difference is that the monastic vocation is focussed in the monastery, the mendicant vocation is to go out to the people, in total openness to God through fidelity to the Gospel – *go out and preach the Good News, baptising...* While *fuga mundi* within the monastery marked the monastic; itineracy going two by two identified the friars.

All mendicants – Dominican, Carmelite, Servite, Augustinian as well as Franciscan did not live from the land [as the Monasteries] but from questing. More than 200 thousand religious carry the name Franciscan, also within the Anglican, and Swedish and Lutheran churches. The Franciscan Order flourished in C13 – C15, though not always peacefully.

The issue of poverty has continually bogged down and then revived. In recent times the Order has become clerical and this has become the main question of identity. In essence, the Order is a lay Order. Recent attempts to have this recognised by the Church have met official resistance. An original description: according to its rule – *a group of Christians, mainly lay, living in small mobile communities in an atmosphere of prayer and fraternal affection.*

Authentic Gospel living is not to be reduced to issues of poverty. Gospel living means to receive God through Jesus whom he has sent, and to deepen this priority through prayer in faith. In line with the Sermon on the Mount it involves refusal of all kinds of violence through Gospel freedom in fraternal equality, challenging all forms of power games and authoritarian domination. In the heart of this Francis showed loyalty to the Church binding himself to the Lord Pope and the Church of Rome.

He was well aware of the failings in the Church, but believed that only in this communion, marked as it is by both love and exclusions, could he remain faithful to the Gospel. No specific apostolate is proposed other than following the teaching and in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. That the Rule remains contemporary is due to the fact that unlike the magnificent rule of Benedict, which stands on its own and serves even now as a charter for Europe, Francis' rule makes no sense apart from him.

The Rule is more inspirational than regulatory. The text, simple and direct, has a contemporary ring, indicating the great Gospel options. There is no sense of imposition,

rather do we heed Francis' final words to the friars – *as the Lord has shown me what it is mine to do, may he show you what is yours to do.*

What about today?

Francis lived a unique spiritual experience – his charism is his, and differs from the Franciscan charism. Followers joined him and they lived a common adventure, each in his own way. So emerged a movement of spiritual energy that had a social dimension which proved attractive to so many – but why so few now? The original way was spontaneous, had no fixed or precise plans, and so had an appeal but also a fragility. This fragility has become more to the fore over recent years – and not unconnected with this has become more organised and focussed on preserving its charism – with a decline in spontaneity.

We need to ask honestly what we are about. What does Franciscan mean today? We are talking about what started as an adventure and not just a project, started in an unstructured way – open to being led by the Spirit of God, which presumes that the Spirit has pride of place in our living. The two-fold foundations – Francis' personal charism and that of the original group – must be distinguished and recognised.

What is now known as Franciscan was lived originally by Francis – who was not a Franciscan, but a lover of God through friar Christ loving him. We must both affirm the uniqueness of his charism, and that it is not transferable. What he lived and how he lived belongs to him alone, and no one else can reproduce it. He is at the head of the movement that carries his name and its reference point. To think that others could live this way in an identical fashion is illusory. There is only one Francis of Assisi. He has played his part – and his presence and memory is still evoking response.

The original life was not his alone, it was the life of men and women who, in their own way also lived their response to the Gospel inspiration. It expressed itself through diversity, with the ever present zeal of Francis for inspiration. Eventually it became weighed down and set in its ways – the original spontaneity was diluted and inevitably somewhat mediocre.

For the first 25 years [a honeymoon period] the group lived on the grace of its origins. Then moved to living with the few remaining who actually lived with him, onto those who did not live with him but had experience of those who did – and now. Whatever *now* means, it must remain connected to its foundations.

Today's Franciscan reality is manifest in its followers who bring us, not the raw, neutral event but their interpretation of it. How did those who came after the initial period continue the witness? Francis' writings actually make available something more than the subsequent witnesses, because they present in words what Francis lived in flesh and blood, thanks to his integrity. What Francis saw as being born from him was the variety of personal interpretations; his writings help show what was intended and what was actually happening. Next come the actual eye-witnesses who lived with him; then come the biographers – each group moving steadily away from the original experience.

What struck his first followers was that here was something different – poverty, itineracy, preaching [non-clerical]. Thanks to the biographers we have many of the facts and the circumstances surrounding them. When we read what they present we are seeing through the eyes of men and women of another epoch. The difference between these writings and Francis' own written evidence is occasionally highlighted by seeming contradictions in the way basic elements are presented – e.g. how to approach and live the Mystery of Christ.

The biographers had the facts, but they had their own ways of interpreting. What about our times? How can we keep in touch with the original events after more than 800 years? Our interests and experiences will have us question and favour different aspects than those emphasised in the biographies. The findings of Vatican II are different from those of Lateran

IV. Our interest tends to be in discovering the roots of our charism than in the historical expressions.

How he saw Church and hierarchy is particularly relevant at a time when Church structures are falling apart. We need to find from Francis how he lived the Gospel and responded to it – since this is the universal call. There is a group, having a specific shape, which carries the name Friars Minor and claims to be the authentic place where Francis' charism is being lived today. This body is determined to live according to the Gospel vision of Francis. Does this group actually demonstrate that the charism is still alive? The official institution doesn't seem to have much in common with the original C13 expression.

It is ponderous and lacking some of the spontaneous joy – evidence for this is how so many who are leaving the Order cite loneliness as their reason – in a brotherhood!!! In Church affairs today Franciscan has little influence. There is a widespread involvement of sisters and brothers in Church living. The name *Franciscan* still has appeal – but to values other than bringing in new members. It has been asked – *why are the Franciscans not like Francis?* Is this accurate or caricature? The truth lies in the fact that, mediocre as it might be, they are the bearers of the charism received by Francis for men and women in every age.

This group holds the memory of an event dear to its heart and has a permanent call to relive it. This not just an historical remembering, like Armistice Day. In spite of lapses and betrayals, the Franciscan movement has preserved the image of Francis and his Gospel restlessness – presenting a new way of being human. Today there are signs of new period of transformation, one more radical than in previous times, emerging. There is a new look at Francis and the Sources with the desire to interpret them within the signs of the times. A fresh vitality is running through the 800-year-old tree – maybe heralding a new spring.

Reliving the Franciscan adventure today is primarily the task of those claiming him as Brother Francis, and who are committed to living his rule – his way of life. But since his way of life is to live the Gospel, it is a task challenging all believers.

The Impossible 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 live 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! Children were told that if they didn't stop doing this or that, God would not love them anymore. That is outrageous. The value of love is that it 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?

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 life trying to become what he had accepted. As the Eternal Word became flesh in Jesus, God's own self-awareness, God's self-given 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 the 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.

Try and 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 the beloved of Abba. He was rejected. *But the Word will not return to the Father without achieving its purpose* - Is.55.11. 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* - Jn.15.15.

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 - into 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 words so Isaiah - *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' 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 by having nothing of our own.

Do not see St. Francis' 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 by the way I live the Gospel, can I name them? 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: to live a life *shaped* by the Gospel, and 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 - it *is the art of the disciple*.

Tell-tale signs are useful. The intrusion of routine, predictability etc... Has orthodoxy replaced intimacy, instead of enhancing it? Are we trying to offer Christianity without Christ; it is pointless to offer a book on central heating to freezing people! Joe Chinnici, ofm, 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 had to make decisions about brethren which would 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' asceticism was extraordinary. Allowing for the fact that he overstepped the mark, 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, is there room for what God tells me about you?

My *willing* needs the guidance of my *thinking*. When the Order lost this priority, it did so because it overstressed a narrow understanding of poverty, ending up doctrinaire and fragmented. St. Francis focussed 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. 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 out with 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*! As already said, what use is my *availability* to you if, for whatever reason, you cannot ask 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 that 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 me 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: *changed living* indicating real sorrow and regret - Ad.24. the *helping hand* offered through the Sacrament of Reconciliation - RNB.20; RB.7. a new heart, in that my decisions emerge from a new value system, which allows by God's instinct to save - no matter what the cost - free rein. 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! Lett. to Faithful.

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*. 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' 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 - 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 [*Benny Baisas confronting President Marcos - likened him to 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 only situations which need change - rearranging the furniture - it is the 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 - 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 with differences 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 are 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 need 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 allows 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 - *All Creatures of our God and King* - and getting it completely wrong, by no mention of sister/brother! Our community living is often exposed to the same vandalism, if it bears no resemblance to fraternity!

St. Francis' 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' 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*, an 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, unrepeatable, 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 already 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 desire becoming my meaning.

Here we have the inner heart of St. Francis' 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 both the Word and the meaning of the Word.

It is the Spirit who will make clear to you everything I have said. not for us to interpret:

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, 20 knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. 2Pet.1.19

The dynamic of this is of the essence of prayer. Because there is no discrepancy in Jesus between who he is and what he says, in recalling his words for us, 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?