

Does St Francis Help?

Prayer has a neat and tidy description – *raising mind and heart to God!* True it may be – but it didn't help me, until I learned from Francis to unpack the words, and discover an experience. But, why bother with prayer?

What I began to appreciate is that we don't really have an option. We need to talk [*communicate*] because of our inbuilt desire not just to *be*, but to be-with. We are fashioned in the image and likeness of God – the image and likeness of perfect communion.

S John tells us in his first letter *God is love: Father, Son and Spirit – lover – beloved – and the environment allowing this to happen, the mutual love*. We are imaged as perfect communion!

When S Irenaeus tells us *God is worshipped when we are fully alive* – he is saying that being human reaches perfection through *total* communion. This has already been our daily *experience* [*not just information*] – where there is no communication there is no sense of already belonging.

We all have a word – an awareness of who we are [*not as real as we like to presume*]. I can speak this word to you in such a way for it become a bond between us – provided you accept what I am saying about myself [*accepting is crucial, but does not imply agreeing with it*].

Acceptance is important because it means you are listening to me. Then you have the chance to say *thank-you, but it's not how I experience you!* Which is an invitation for me to listen, and discuss [*communication*].

This is not just a good idea – it is how God is; there is a Word in God [*God knows who God is*] which is perfectly communicated, received and perfectly accepted as spoken – Son; this perfect mutuality, giving and receiving is the Holy Spirit – God's love-life – is God enjoying being God, now freely and totally given to us through the Word spoken in flesh and blood. Waiting to be heard, and accepted.

God's Word is spoken outside God – as Creation, and when this Word is received as spoken it becomes the bond between us. But, *how* is the Word spoken – where can we hear it? By definition every created thing is a sound of God's voice seeking communication – needing a listener.

Scripture tells us this Word is *alive and active*. *Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart* – Heb.4.12.

Perhaps a better model for prayer comes through remembering that we do not primarily pray to get things – though, as the Our Father tells us, prayer of petition is very real.

The primary focus of prayer is to bring ever greater communion, to be intimate with God. S Francis came to believe, through frantic searching for God, that all that was

needed was to *be still and know...* as Psalm 46.10 reminds us – he learned how to be still, waiting to be found by God.

He discovered why one person needs to say to another – *I love you!* – *see who I am because of you being with me.* God said that to him – *come and see who I am for you* – Jesus, Word made flesh. This underlines that the first movement in prayer is to be aware of presence – to listen [*proper meaning of obey*]. Jesus – the *all* of God – and more than that, *the all of God for me* – and you, and for each uniquely – God doesn't make copies, has no grandchildren; everyone as a first-born.

That is what God calls *real*. Wonderful to hear, difficult to believe because all kinds of experiences rush in to tell me that *I'm not worthy* [even the Church has told me that], God is not interested in worthiness, not even in sin, he simply says this is what I want to give you – no terms and conditions – are you willing – worthy or not, am I willing to receive?

This came to S Francis as an *experience* not just information – God loves me exactly as I am, he created me for me to enjoy being me as much as God enjoys me being me – as S Ignatius told us *God is worshipped when we are fully alive.* Nothing vague or abstract about this – what else does Calvary tell me than *you will be lost over my dead body?*

So – what do we owe God? From my point of view, I owe God everything, I wouldn't exist without God, or survive without the creation he has fashioned for me. All undeniably true – but does it matter what God has to say about this? *This is who I am for you* – a helpless and vulnerable baby in need, a thirsty traveller waiting for a drink by a well, a terrified man flat on the ground sweating blood – crucified – and risen telling me *this is who I am for you*, because I love you exactly as you are, worthy or not, sinner or saint. This is why it is good to remember that every saint has a past – and every sinner has a future – if I would simply *believe*, whether I can understand it or not.

How would you feel, having bought a special present for a friend, to be asked: *thank-you so much, how much do I owe you?* Why do we do it to God? This is why believing is simple – but never easy! Simple – uncomplicated, all is on offer, no strings. Thank God I am not asked to be worthy – just willing, even if bemused!

I was given to myself precisely to become the gift I am – to be willing to en flesh this gift [*as God has done in Jesus*] so as to become gift for others. Often summed-up as *love God and love neighbour.*

Thy will be done means working to make all this real and primary in my life – to become what I am receiving, to be that unique expression of God's love – which no one other than me can do through Grace. When I hear it, receive it and strive to become it. My reality is as God-given gift to myself to become gift. Which is why we say *thy* will be done, not thy *will* – not mine.

This is the reason why life was so special to Francis – to make God's love present wherever he found himself, no matter what the circumstances – be it the jubilation of

Palm Sunday or the humiliation of Good Friday – because both are necessary for Easter Day.

The human person is creation aware of itself. Before the arrival of the human, there was the wonder of creation, but no way of any awareness of it, no way of responding to what is being offered; as yet, no prayer.

With human *experiencing* [*not just knowing*] creation can now reflect on itself – strive to understand [*the mind*], and become fascinated into desire [*will*]. Creation itself can only praise God by being itself – human culture is the means for this to happen, by our living in the world respectfully and gratefully.

Jesus is the perfect expression of God, made part of creation, a presence able to be experienced – not just studied. It is through *experience* and not information that the way to becoming Christ-like opens up.

Interesting to note: asking someone *how do you feel about this or whatever* – often gets the answer *I think...* Thinking is not feeling! I can answer the question - *I think...* and begin to search my mind; or I can risk saying *I feel...* and discover something within me which my mind is unaware of. *The heart has awareness that the mind can never know* – Pascal.

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same – deals out that being indoors each one dwells; selves – goes itself, myself speaks and spells – crying what I do is me, for that I came.
GMHopkins.

Our God-given life has but one way to travel home to where it came from – *be yourself* – that is why God made you, the apple of his eye. Be as fully yourself as Christ is himself. S John tells us this in the very first Chapter of the Gospel – *To all who believe he gave power to know [experience] God as Abba.*

This is celebrated in Baptism. This new awareness brought Francis insights about his life. Only God is eternal, there was a time when I didn't exist – but there never will be a time when I don't exist! The wonder of Grace shows there is much more – there is a sense in which I always existed!

God never *began* to love me – there is no beginning or ending in God - *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart* – Jer.1.5.

What was God seeing of me before I was born? I can find out, and see *the face I had before I was born* – it becomes visible in the way I live my life; as it unfolds; gradually revealing that face, usually reflected back to me in the faces of those who love me.

Jesus told us something about himself *the way, the truth and the life*. Genesis tells us that it is not for us to decide what is good and what is evil – *only God is good* – this God-goodness is made flesh in Jesus, an offer for us to become the way – Christlike.

There is an *is* and an *ought* in all of us – the way I am actually living every day, and the way I *promised* to try to live. The closer these two come together, the more do I become Christlike. Why become Christlike?

Because God's eternal desire is for all that is of God [everything] become one in God; and for inanimate creation to share in this, by the way it is lived-in by humankind letting it be as God intended. Twice in the NT does Abba say – *this is my beloved, listen to him* and seek to become what you hear.

This also tells me that anything that would try to make me other than I am – distances me from experiencing God's love. This I can do to myself – refuse to listen, *walk other paths, other ways* – other than become the unique creation God intends for me – being me as I am. Likewise I can be *pushed* away by others refusing to accept me as I am – either personally or systemically. Like the Pharisee tried to do to Jesus when they simply saw him as a law-breaker.

Only God knows who I am, and God will tell me if I am willing to listen – *you too can become as Jesus is – beloved of Abba*. This is why Francis' biographer says Francis did not so much pray as become a prayer. When the disciples saw him pray they were eager to learn how. *Teach us to pray...* they didn't so much hear him say anything or do anything – *they saw him being someone*, being himself, the beloved of Abba. Setting all else aside simply to *experience* directly Abba's love for him.

Scripture tells us there are no second-class citizens for God, everyone is a *first-born*: *You have come to the joyful gathering of God's first-born, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, who is the judge of all people, and to the spirits of good people made perfect* – Heb.12.23. God has children, but no grandchildren! Everyone is as first-born.

Francis lived consciously all the time in the warmth of the presence of God – legend has it that when he was returning from questing, with little to show for it, in the mist and rain, his companion saw Francis sit down on a rock. In some frustration through tiredness and rejection, the brother just wanted to get back home. He asked Francis *what are you doing?* Who answered *I'm thanking God – for what, we've nothing to bring home for supper, its cold and wet, what are you thanking God for? For the stone I'm sitting on!*

S Bonaventure likened his experience of prayer to that of a sculptor – *who adds nothing to the block of marble; simply removes matter to reveal what is hidden inside*. Prayer lets us experience God's love removing the debris from within me, so that I can see the face I had before I was born. A simple process – but not easy!

Simple, because it is uncomplicated – *be still and know that I am God* – Ps.46.10. Not easy – because it calls for total honesty, it is me as God made me that God desires, not what I've fashioned for myself. It means letting go of all pretence to be other than I am [*I did it my way*]. S John tells us *truth will set you free* – Jn.8.32.

See in this how Francis understood Poverty – not an economic issue – but the awareness graced to him to see the gift that God had given him - wanting the best of everything, which he first interpreted as an end and not as the means – he wanted the finest clothes, wealth, prestige, knighthood.

After his conversion, he still wanted the best of everything [*God's gifts are always good*] but now saw that the best of everything was not what he wanted for himself, but

Abba loving him – someone not something; it was then he cried-out *this is what I long for with all my heart* - to let God love me.

Real poverty meant he had nothing to defend because he had nothing – which left a wide open space eager to be filled to overflowing – as the gift of God enjoying being with him. In his 19th Admonition he wrote: *who you are before God, that you are and nothing other. Who you are before God* – God's chosen, to receive the all of God.

When I can freely accept what Duns Scotus called my *thisness* – I am not just someone, I am *this* one, deliberately fashioned as me, to *experience* God's love as no one else can, then will I discover how to say yes: *All the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory* - 2Cor.1.20.

We miss out so often, because, like Adam and Eve, we want to be other than we are. And what does that do? *They hid themselves from God, because they were naked. Naked I came – naked I will return* – Job.1.21, nothing to be afraid of, because I am created to be seen and loved exactly as I am.

My false self is the fruit of self-centred living – with all too obvious signs: *make sure I'm all right; make sure I have what I want [not content with simply what I need]. able to offload responsibility when things go wrong, to blame others for not letting me do things my way* – whereas my true self is not found in me, but in the other, ultimately the other.

Having embraced this new way, Francis discovered the *something more* Heb.11.40 promises. Having let go of his *ownership* of creation, something totally unexpected happened; Creation was now free to come back to him in a new way – as sisters and brothers. All this because he now *experienced* Christ as *Friar Christ* – of the same Father.

Prayer is an atmosphere that is inviting, warm and affirming. As a teenager, Francis was totally self-focused, arrogant, unreliable and a spendthrift. His experience with the Cross of San Damiano made him aware of this as linked with his discontent and being lost. He started to respond *Lord, who are you, and who am I?*

Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart, and give me right faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, wisdom and understanding, Lord, that I may carry out your holy and true command. Amen.

Why did he want to do this? Not because it was the right thing to do, but through his inner restlessness, he had been searching for anything that would bring him peace of mind and heart, and everything seemed to fail. His encounter with the leper was the turning point. He had a natural aversion to the presence of leprosy – the stench was stomach-turning.

He confessed this, and the *Lord led me amongst them! What had been horrendous and forbidding now became sweetness and light.* The stench was still there, horror of the disfigurement – but now he had been graced to see the leper and not the leprosy.

Grace doesn't keep us away from what we can't cope with – it leads us in there in such a new way – to be set free to see the person in need; to set him free. He learned how God detests sin and loves the sinner.

Prayer is about reconciling opposites – not getting rid of what upsets me – but getting rid of my unfreedom – a quality always present in prayerful folk. The bitter becomes sweet all the while remaining itself. Francis now owned his own *leprosy* [self-centredness], which was healed and brought him ever closer to the presence of God. There were no no-go areas in his life, crucial for prayer – *do not be afraid, I am with you* – Is.43.1.

Jesus rescues the person from the individual – or warms the individual into a person; recognising our core need is for communion, appreciating ourselves. As in the Trinity, where all are equal and never the same. God creates only gifts, not property; originals and never copies. It is God-given grace *not to be the same* that shows how God is with me; to know myself in God – not in lonely isolation. I don't have to go looking, just *be still and know*. I am given to myself in order to host this meeting with God, and so find myself.

Where does it start? Accept the reality of my poverty – I am poor, in the sense that my fulfilment is not within me; and poverty is intentional and never a vacuum, it is a capacity to be filled – but not by me – which makes my impoverishment never a threat, but my inner strength, as this is who I really am.

To rise up into God I must first go down and find this real self where God has always been – waiting. It is me moving from me-in-charge-of-me to where I ought to be, able to welcome the all of God because now there is nothing in the way.

In writing to the Poor Clares Bonaventure shares: *look at your real self, no covers or curtains; be honest with yourself – look at what already is in your life and what could be. What has my selfishness done to me – what could I and still can be without it? Foster a desire to be your real self.*

The closer Francis got to God, the more real did creation become for him – the reality of the *other than me* – The morning offering of the late Mycheal Judge, ofm, Chaplain to New York Fire Service and victim number 1 of 9/11 was truly of Francis:

Lord, take me where you want me to go. Show me who you want me to meet. Tell me what you want me to say - and keep me out of your way!

Prayer is *entering into Creation, never fuga mundi, never flight from...* It is prayer that persuades us that creation is *for us*, letting us realise just how much we need it. In its turn, the grace of gratitude wells up, the need simply to say thank-you – as Francis did in his Canticle. In fact, he was able to embrace the leper because he had now *experienced* himself being embraced.

What is outstanding about God's love is its obvious *otherness*. God-self is totally emptied for me, nothing partial. This is why the leper was no longer an object of charity for Francis, but an emptiness awaiting fulfilment by experiencing God's love – for someone to notice. This is why love of God involves love of neighbour.

For this seismic change to bear fruit in us, solitude [*of both place and heart*] is needed. Solitude is the opposite of loneliness which alienates, isolates and threatens. Unfortunately, many a religious formation programme – albeit unwittingly – imposed loneliness [*quiet time*] for solitude, simply by doing just that – imposing – without any prior introduction as to the why and wherefore of solitude, which is the opportunity not just to be alone, but to-be-alone with. Francis loved solitude because he was a lover: *gather up yourself, and with your beloved enter the room of your heart, and be there – together* – Bonaventure.

How do I foster this within me? Become aware of what is already a fact within me? I have God's Spirit deep within me already. It takes silence and quiet [*inner and outer*] to hear the Spirit breathing with my breath.

The Spirit who is goodness, heightens my sensitivity to so much goodness all around me, which I have already enjoyed without knowing where it actually comes from and where it will take me, if I simply hear and heed: *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts* – Heb.3.15. I am *God's chosen good place* where God is for anyone.

See here the impact of the Transfiguration – Jesus transfigured by joy, goodness and happiness is telling us that this experience is ours too, if we *harden not our hearts*. Like Peter, who wanted to do something about what he was experiencing. Be still, remember all the unnoticed transfigurations that have already happened in life, where awareness of goodness has literally transformed – if only for a moment. We have a God-given gift precisely for this – the ability to be fascinated.

Fascination makes me like God – totally the transcending self I am momentarily experiencing; is permanent in God and not ye, but will be for us!

Again, a simple process – but never easy. There are forces within me unwilling to let go of me looking after me, and so robbing myself. When the Gospel impacted on Francis he *experienced* within himself: *this is what I long for with all my heart*. Which prompted Bonaventure to counsel us: *trust Grace, not logic – not light but fire*.

Culture tells us *fulfilment means good health, wealth and be able to provide for ones needs* – logic! But why so many suicides in prosperous places? Because the reality is that my fulfilment is *outside* me – I am created to be filled-full, but not by me!

I need to remember where I come from, and where I am going; for me to be full I need a *you*. Desire happens either through *experience* of presence, or the painful *experience* of absence.

This is why prayer is desire – *who are you, Lord and who am I?* It is a two-way flow, God wanting to be with me, and me hearing and desiring this. Sadly, desire gets pushed to one side by my many wants – for affirmation, security, reputation, to be like

This is the real and necessary place for mortification. Mortification simply for its own sake is masochism – it is always a means, never an end. It becomes an option when I realise that *finite* answers will never quench and *infinite* thirst.

Francis never rejected the *natural* in him – but his conversion taught him never expect it to be enough. Desire is very different from wishing. It is awareness of the need for the promised heart transplant: *I will remove your heart of stone and put in you a heart of flesh* – Ezek.26.36.

Prayer is fashioned by true desire – *God's declared desire to be with me*. Anything can prompt a desire for God – provided it is truly my desire – *what I desire with all my heart*. Sin is desire disordered – self first.

Disordered desire sets us against others by *getting* and *keeping*, by defensive attitudes. Calvary broke this spiral of violence, by Jesus giving himself freely to be crucified for love of others; the scapegoat for all of us to blame – loved us right into death, and is alive. *Christ on the cross bows his head and waits for you; arms wide open to embrace you, hands open to touch you, his feet nailed, to stay there waiting for you* – Bonaventure.

For many, the cross does not appeal. Francis was graced with awareness of its significance. Desire for intimacy with God means wanting to be with the involved God, who is Trinity, is relationship freely sharing our suffering.

In the Gospel, blind Bartimaeus – Mk.10.46 – received his sight when his desire to be healed coincided with Jesus' desire to heal – *your faith has done this. Both are needed for relationship* – the mutual blending of desire.

God is total creativity which corresponds to our desire to know where we come from and where we are going – religious or otherwise. Openness to new possibilities is evidence of this. God always with me – though I'm not always with God. This presence is always alluring, though never coercive – simply there as the oasis of all that is good and desirable.

Our common understanding of freedom is autonomy – choosing, being self-determined. But this not what the Gospel terms *freedom of the children of God* – which is to *experience* intimacy as one with self and others, being other-person-centred. Love rests on this freedom. God created an *other* capable of saying no as well as yes. We are created by God's will alone – and if I would be with God intimately, I must freely choose this. It takes two fashion human into divine – my desire to receive meeting God's desire to give [*witnessed in all conversion stories*].

Creation is not evidence of God's power; it is how God communicates love. In a sense, God becomes powerless in the presence of human freedom. Love waits for me to become aware of what I'm being freely offered, with all my detours and dallying – simply waiting for my freely uttered yes. Even in everyday living I experience such freedom with those who risk letting me be myself.

Human – the crowning glory of creation, making creation able to desire and to receive intimacy with Love itself, one with self-giving God. God risked the potential ruin of creation to make this happen.

This is why the cross is the true symbol of what *almighty* means in God. Francis experienced God as a *helpless child, clinging to a human breast*, simply waiting to be cared for. This is why human's greatest gift is not our ability to think, but the desire to

love. It is when God's eternal desire for me meets my desire to receive and enjoy, that creation reaches its purpose – *may they all be one as we ourselves are one* – Jn.17.21.

God risked letting me be myself – I constantly resist becoming the person God has in mind for me - *I know best!* This is why the Cross *is not focused on sin and judgement*, but on the lengths God goes-to just to be with me.

Love is the meeting of desires – God's desire is to be with the poor and the excluded – if there is to be a meeting between God's desires and mine, I need to uncover my desires – especially my hidden ones – to see the likelihood of such coming together. Does my desire coincide – the answer will be yes, only if I have undergone the heart transplant promised in Ezek.26.36.

A nice, squeaky-clean God, removed from the messiness of the world, is unreal. Bonaventure reminded us that we actually meet God *bending over from the cross to embrace the lowest of the low* – me. If I would experience unconditional-love-for-me, I need to go to the cross. Suffering always asks questions about promised happiness – yet suffering is very much part of the world.

To recognise this and to embrace it, is to show faith in the Incarnation; my need to let go of what *is* for me to make room for what could be. Wholeness *experienced* is everyone's dream, and it is on offer, but my determination to be a pain avoider at all costs resists. My charism from Francis – and in dying [*to self*] we are born to eternal life: *unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit* – Jn.12.24.

Pray and be happy

Do I really miss God? How would I know? My everyday life is coloured by this – is God, for me: *remote, male, mysterious, elderly and humble...* as time passes, I seem to know more about who God isn't than who God is.

I have never been at ease with *Almighty God* – which the Church seems to be very fond of. Maybe this is one of the reasons I found Francis attractive. I am not a believer in *dressing-up* – really and figuratively. I am certainly attracted by the revelation of God as *Abba*; especially when I am told that my destiny is the same as Jesus', to become *beloved of Abba*.

Love is the very foundation of Jesus' life, so much so that he felt compelled to be wherever it was fractured or missing – no matter the reasons why. Bonaventure puts it like this: *wherever love is present, join in and celebrate; wherever love is broken, be there and mend it; wherever it is missing – bring it with you!*

Keep it simple, be wherever God promised to be - *I have come that you may enjoy your life abundantly* – Jn.10.10. We cannot go to God who is *out there*. God is within me – *God's Spirit is in my heart* – incarnate in my incarnation – the way I am actually living, good or otherwise.

God's desire is to be with the poor and excluded – he is waiting for me in my poverty and my being excluded. My reality is my impoverishment – I am made empty for God

to be my fulfilment, if I want it! Part of my mission is for people to find God within my poverty.

The dust of the earth has become the body of God – the dust from which I came is capable, through Grace, of showing this. Prayer does not focus on how much greater God is than we are. God is with us wherever we are – rejoicing with us in our goodness, calling us home in our sinfulness. We can walk with God, not just *in the cool of the evening*, but in the cloisters of creation. Francis' prayer – his searching for God – rises out of his becoming aware that he already *belongs* – he doesn't have to ask to join! He stresses this when he wrote *the Lord gave me brethren*.

There is a very popular hymn, purporting to be a rendering of Francis' Canticle – *All Creatures of our God and King* – speaks of *burning sun, silver moon, rushing wind, rising morn...* beautiful lyrics in every verse, but never a mention of *the reason* why Francis sang his Canticle – not a mention of brother/sister. The world is not just a beautiful reality *out there*, it is where we *belong as brothers and sisters from one father*. Indeed, how good is the Lord, giving us so many and such a variety of brothers and sisters.

Francis *experienced* Christ in the reality of the *other*, which is why *other* is so special for him; so special that he named *other* as brother and sister. The daunting task God gave to Adam to *name creation for God*, reached its simplicity in Francis' just needing two words – brother and sister.

I cannot know who I am without the context of *other*. The differences we meet in *other than us* are opportunities to see something more of God. When Francis spoke of the *ideal friar minor*, he didn't search for one with 10 qualities, but for 10 with one quality!

Otherness is goodness incarnated – including me and other than me – just as Jesus did not simply reveal himself to him, but introduced him to Abba. What Francis experienced in Jesus was being invited into Trinitarian intimacy as one who belongs. *Behold each day He humbles Himself [cf. Phil. 2:8] as when He came from the royal throne [Wis. 18:15] into the womb of the Virgin; 17 each day He comes to us, appearing humbly, as a little piece of bread* – Ad.1.16.

Humility is not simply the lowly condition of earthly living – it is Francis' name for God's love reaching us as part of creation, through the Incarnation. Christ is the centre of the Trinity. S Clare speaks of the revealing of God, where *in my own flesh I can meet God who desires to be with me*.

Prayer uncovers this and lays it wide open to be relished and enjoyed – God delighted to be with me. Clare begins with the Incarnation, not with Scripture. She doesn't seek to lift herself out of the world in pursuit of spiritual perfection, but delights in finding where the Lord longs to be found.

Like Francis she begins with *other* – with God who became *other* so that *other* might become more. The Incarnation can tell me who I am for God – one for whom the Incarnation happens, since I am *other* than God. Prayer is to let this seep into conscious living. For Francis, prayer does not begin with the Book of Scripture, but with the Book of the Cross.

Clare uses the word *gaze* to describe this. Through Grace, gazing at the cross lets me see much more than is there by nature. It lets me into the *why* of the cross, and what *being human* really means. How sad that we have grown into using the phrase *I'm only human*, negatively. To become fully human is to become Christ-like. Which means that only someone as big as God is small enough to reveal it totally.

To be truly human, is to be one with the divine. Which is why Clare speaks of Christ as the *mirror of ourselves*. Not simply by suffering, but not letting suffering keep me away from the *other*. Writing to Agnes she simply meant *we become what we love!* [*As any parent sees in a child*].

If I love *things, or possessions* – I become what I love – I become one with *other* by being myself – whatever other may be! Gazing at the cross, allows this gently to seep into me as *all this just for me*. Feel this, seek to be warmed by it so as to let it radiate. *You have been fed and nourished by Word and Sacrament, now bring him to birth by the way you live.*

God taking flesh in me as I become as thoroughly human as Jesus. In the fullness of my humanity the glory of God abides: *God is praised when we are fully alive*. The cross tells us that every self is capable of this – no matter who.

Poverty and Prayer

Poverty builds community. *Hard times* can drive us together – but to be *driven* is oppressive. This country was driven together in 1939 through fear of a common enemy. When the enemy was gone – so too was the coming together, as evidenced by the rejection of Churchill at the first post-war general election.

God promises fulfilment to the poor – and calls them blessed. There is a passivity involved in our inhabiting poverty; not so with God, who is actively self-emptying for the impoverished. God has made space within the Godhead to welcome all as equals. To accept Clare's invite to *gaze* on Christ-crucified is to open ourselves to the one real question – *who is God for me?*

We are primed by culture to see goodness as co-terminus with the absence of suffering. *Gazing* at the cross is gifted to us – it is allowing the indwelling Spirit to do our seeing for us: *who will make all things clear* – Jn.16.13 [*not necessarily comfortable*]. This requires me allowing God's Spirit within, access to me – having let go of me-for-me.

For Francis, *sine proprio* [*without anything of one's own*] was his everyday living; Bonaventure developed a theology of Poverty; Clare is somewhere between the two. Bonaventure says we can't begin our journey to abide in God without living consciously within our creaturely poverty – I am neither the origin nor the fulfilment of my life. I come from God without my consent so that I can return to God with an unequivocal and free yes!

Being created carries a tendency to dwell on the nothingness from which I came. Scripture says I am created poor so as to be enriched: *you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you*

through his poverty might become rich – 2Cor.8. Which is why prayer is always first invoking my total dependence [poverty] as the gateway to this promised enrichment.

Sin is refusing to be poor – insisting on being self-sufficient, getting, keeping and fending for myself. Accepting my dependence on God [*poverty*] is enrichment because God cannot be anything other than faithful to what is promised – I am gifted to myself so that I can become gift in my turn.

Grace turns me from the mirror to the window, to see who is seeing me and delighting in the sight. This brings me out of hiding – lest God sees my nakedness [*like Adam and Eve*]; to live freely and by choice for the one who is delighted I am me.

Freedom is gift to choose, but having freely chosen I now have responsibility for what I have done. I am free to put my hand into fire, but having freely done so I am not free to avoid the consequences. It is *sine proprio* that frees me to be myself – rejoicing to be totally dependent on God.

The Word embraces the poverty of being human, showing how this does not remove the promised equality with God – *I am poor to become rich*. Bonaventure prays: *why did you pour out your blood in a torrent, when a single drop would be more than enough? I know you did it for no other reason than to love me*.

This is the *almighty* in God; power to persuade – this is why there is no difference between gazing at the cross and at the helpless baby in the manger. No wonder Francis has little room for economic poverty – preferring a way of life over an imposed discipline. *Sine proprio* does not mean being without things, but without possessions, which robs me of my dependence. I need to ask myself frequently what do I actually covet as *mine*? Is my need to control as strong as ever?

By definition living in such poverty is community – I am dependent, incomplete without the *other* who desires to be my completion. Even when this means leading me into places where I would rather not go – Jn.21.17. It is the poverty of being created and not self-starting or self-explained.

Get this right and all else will fall into place – *truth sets us free* – Jn.8.32. Ask – am I free to celebrate the goodness in one who is so different from me? It is the mutuality of genuine care that humanises. This, again, is simple – not complicated – but never easy, which is why Francis called *humility* the sister of poverty.

Clare

Sine proprio [*without anything of one's own*] and intimacy belong together. Which is why my capacity for intimacy is frustrated by my persistently wanting to be in charge of me; my pride, my needing to be right, my sin. The Incarnation clearly shows how God lives *sine proprio* – by becoming fully human, even when the cost is the hammer and nails of crucifixion, in its many and varied forms. I have a human nature, which can take me deep into intimacy if I accept it being graced by the way God loves, the Holy Spirit, whatever the pathway – Golgotha or the hill of Transfiguration.

For Clare, *sine proprio* means beauty – freedom to love and in doing so reflect and radiate the presence of God as available intimacy – because there is no other

contender. Sine proprio shows me God as the one who belongs. The genuineness of my desiring will show me if I am yet free from the captivity of wanting things *my way*. Am I yet as God is – free to be with my heart’s desire?

Friendship

The shape of life is built through relationships; and prayer is the prelude to this: *I have made known to you everything the Father has told me* – Jn.15.15. Listening in friendship to what the Lord has to say [*I will hear what the Lord has to say – a voice that speaks of peace* – Ps.85.8]. What God has in mind for me is that I *experience* peace, both in light and in darkness.

Friendship flourishes through being-with, *real* presence; a presence that went through being battered, bruised and executed, just to get through to me how much I matter to God. What happens when I truly *gaze* on the cross – all this, for me?

Usually we do not count those who hurt us friends. *Love your enemies* introduces a new priority; a reminder that every experienced reality shows something of God. Francis struggled with this – the leper – in that his friendship with Christ presumes his willingness to accept everyone exactly as God made them. Made deliberately to be accepted [*not just tolerated*].

Jesus’ love for Abba took him to the cross – Christ’s anguish was seeing how unaware, even unconcerned, about God’s love for us we are. Francis’ eager embracing the cross wasn’t to suffer, but genuine anguish that love is not loved. *Please, Lord, let the fiery, honeyed force of Your love lap up my spirit from everything there is under Heaven; so that I may die for love of love for You, who delighted to die for love of love for me.*

This prompted Francis to travel to Egypt [*5th Crusade*] not to fight, not to condemn, but to greet Sultan Malek-el-Kamil as *my brother, son of Ishmael*. Though the Sultan was not converted to embrace Christianity, he accepted the gesture, friendship transcending all boundaries, simply to be with.

Friendship always asks sacrifice. [*This gesture is unforgotten to this day – when the Vatican was seeking to establish relations with Turkey, they were asked to send, as diplomats, two sons of Francis*].

For Francis, the heart is the abode of the will – where sin also is present, which is why any talk of conversion has to be heart-to-heart. The human heart can be described as the way God says: *how lovely is your [my] dwelling place* – Ps.84. And again in the Sermon on the Mount – *blessed are the clean of heart* – Mt.5.8, and why we pray *a pure heart create for me, Lord, put your steadfast Spirit within me* – Ps.51.10.

Contemplation is not thinking my way into a new way of living, but living myself into a new way of thinking. Affection and intimacy are the true occupants of the heart, so as to welcome the real presence of the living God – or reject it, as the heart can know and dally with sin. Contemplation is the opportunity to embrace reality [*God*] humbly, and to be there without intent.

When knowledge is given its proper place, it is able to enlighten, recognising the reality of mystery and so allowing access to the mystery of God-with-us. This is where the

challenge arises for me to change the shape of my living, or better, to allow it to happen.

Seeking to become a real live, flesh and blood experience of love graciously poured out seeking a harvest from compassionate living – and letting this be seen and enjoyed – *by their fruits you will know* - Mt.7.15.

This will always entail struggle – *old habits die hard*. See this in Francis when he said *I delayed for a while, and then left the world*. The confrontation ensuing is *inside* – *in the holy love that is God, I beg my brothers to serve, honour and love with a pure heart* – RNB. Prayer focuses on this, allowing truth to flow through me and provoke a response. A response like resting in the Spirit, *be still and know...* Ps.46.

Hebrews tells us: *with us in mind God promised something more* – 11.40. Not something bigger and better, but more like the rush of adrenalin that accompanies surprise and affection, which allows me to see God *through the promise to the clean of heart*. This is why for Francis, the prayer of the clean of heart is *Our Father...* RNB.22; Admonition 21 when the living Spirit within him invited him into intimacy with God as one who already belongs.

What follows from this is a reminder of what Jesus said to Magdalen – *there's no need to cling on to me, I'm not going anywhere* – Jn.20.1-18. Where love is real there is no room for fear of losing. Which is how Francis understood *sine proprio* – no need to cling to what was, which only gets in the way of what is and what will be. Simply relax and accept the invitation to *come and see* – Jn.1.39. Which is how Francis understands obedience – *listening to what the Lord has to say* – Ps.85.8. First through desire, then through his cold heart being warmed enough for him to ask *where do you live?*

We are called to *experience* Abba through knowing friar Christ. Creation is able to be its real self when it is allowed to reflect the abiding presence of God – each part in its own unique way. Mission is *letting life be according to your Word*, expressed in NT as *pray always* – 1Thess.5.16.

Letting things be *according to the Word* is how we are gifted to see God's presence everywhere – be it Bethlehem or Golgotha. This is the fertile soil, ready for the seed – sensitivity to the Word in Creation's myriad forms. Truth has no room for dissembling, no place for denial.

The Incarnation and especially Eucharist speak of *where two or three are gathered in my name* – Mt.18.20 as an invitation to let reality confront me. As Francis wrote: *you have conceived through Word and Sacrament, now bring him to birth by the way you live* – see Ad.51.

I become what I am truly seeking – who I am – who I can yet be – I am able to show something of God not available anywhere else. My spirit is for this – my flesh, at times, not so keen, and so the Word in me becomes inaudible.

Mediocrity raises its head here when my prayer is routine, when I am distracted from being really and truly present to the Word in me. Life is not about achieving but about passionately receiving and experiencing real value [*not valuables*].

It is fire's nature to consume – but in a positive way: *I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled-* Lk.12.49. Fire is both light and warmth – it melts what is frozen. We are told Creation began with a fiery explosion – a big bang – what about the new fire manifest at Pentecost?