

Make me an Instrument

Feast of St Francis (B)

Published in the Ministry District of Yorke Peninsula

Sunday, October 3, 2021

To be an instrument of peace, is as simple and as difficult as rising above what we need for ourselves, in order to meet the needs of another person, or the needs of a situation. In Philippians we read: *'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.'*

If ever there were a recipe for martyrdom this sounds like it might be it! But this not a plea to put ourselves down and to exercise false humility, or to neglect or mistreat ourselves. This teaching, and the Prayer of St Francis, assumes that we are to some degree in touch with God, the source and depth of our true selves. It assumes that we are on the path of transformation. And that we are ready to learn the most paradoxical lesson of our faith, which is that if I want to save my own life, I will lose it, but if I am ready to lose my life for Christ's sake, I will gain it. When my heart is able to reach out to another, even when I feel fragile myself, when I seek deeply to understand another even when I feel misheard and unrecognised, when I can give love even when I do not feel like I am receiving it in return...then I am inches from eternity, and I stand at the door of God's realm.

To look not to my own interests, but to the interests of others, is to trust that my needs will be cared for - that God is hovering over the situation ready to give me what I need with each step I take toward the goodness of the whole.

In our world, we have done a lot of good work on recognising human rights, and protecting the rights of the most vulnerable. This is important. However, on the path to human maturity there is a step beyond enshrining rights. This is the step of willingly forgoing our own rights for the sake of others. Nobody can ask this of us, or force it on another. Only someone who knows who they are - a person who knows themselves to be God's beloved child - can choose this. And it is the central path of our faith. Because Jesus is our Way, our Truth and our Life. In order to show God's love to us, Jesus transcended the same temptations that face us all, and then some. - He overcame our natural human desire to avoid suffering - He overcame the temptation to have a 'successful ministry' on any human measure - He overcame the temptation to prove himself, to show up his opponents, to exercise his considerable power to vindicate himself. And in the end he gave up his grasp on life itself, under the most gruelling and distorting conditions.

We, on the other hand, like to identify our needs, and then hope that everybody else will meet them. We have many tools at our disposal to do this - the Enneagram and other personality maps, and therapeutic relationships are very useful for helping us to realise what our primary needs are, and therefore the things that we are most likely to react to. But the purpose of these things is not to make us more articulate about ourselves so that we can take up residence in our smallness, and invite the world to meet us on those terms. The idea of identifying our primary needs is to recognise how they make us un-free...how they hold us hostage to a particular view of the world, and make our reactions predictable. The point is to seek the healing and transformation of these knee-jerk, or compulsive, responses. When we

can let our needs go in favour of a greater good, of a wider well-being, then we are stepping into freedom - the kind of freedom that generates compassion.

Can you think of an occasion recently when you said, or did something out of a need for another person's approval? Or to control a situation so that the outcome was what you wanted it to be?

Or, can you think of a conversation recently where you felt your heart beat a little bit faster, or when you started interrupting the other person, because you needed to get across that you were right, or justified in what you were saying?

Or, can you think of a time recently when you've put another person down, or cast them in a negative light, or laughed about them, so as to see yourself as one of the 'good guys' - on the winning side, or the righteous side, or the reasonable side?

Or, can you think of a time when you were being asked to look at something painful and difficult about yourself, and instead of entering an honest change process, you simply defended yourself and moved on?

Jesus leads us into an upside-down world, where in giving, we receive, in pardoning, we are pardoned, and in dying that we are born to eternal life. It feels counter-intuitive. It cuts across all our protective mechanisms. But it is the path to freedom and wholeness not just for ourselves as individuals, but for the whole Body...the body that hurts when one part hurts. And for the earth, that groans as we humans, in our un-health, ravage the very life that sustains us.

I have found an alternate translation of this prayer of St Francis with which I would like to close.

A New Prayer of St. Francis

O God our Creator,
give us awareness of the massive forces threatening our world.

Where there is armed conflict,
let us stretch our arms to our brothers and sisters
Where there is abundance,
let there be simple lifestyles and sharing
Where there is poverty,
let there be dignity and constant striving for justice
Where there is selfish ambition,
let there be humble service
Where there is despair,
let there be hope in the Good News
Where there are wounds of division,
let there be unity and wholeness

Help us to be committed to the building of your kingdom,
not seeking to be cared for, but to care,
not expecting to be served, but to serve others,
not desiring material security but placing our security in your love.

For it is in loving imitation of you, God,
that we can discover the healing springs of life
to bring about new birth on our earth and hope for the world.

AMEN