



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Following Christ after the example of St Francis

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Romans 6:1b-11 & Matthew 10:24-39

Revd Darren McIndoe
Priest in Charge of St Stephen's Tye Green
Area Dean of Harlow

At the beginning of the 13th century, a young man was returning from battle. In his heart, he felt that his life was taking the wrong direction, that he wasn't living in a way that would give him purpose and meaning.

He'd set out to prove himself by being a knight, by fighting in wars, and thus gaining a reputation for himself in his local community. But as he knelt before a cross in his local community church, a cross similar in design to the one that you see behind my head. The voice of the Lord spoke. "Build my church," he was instructed.

And so... moving from the comfort of his home. He set up camp in a church. That was in need of being rebuilt and placed brick upon brick, and stone upon stone, until it was fully rebuilt. And in the process, he built a community of young men who shared his aspiration and his way of life.

It was as he was building, that he realised that the bricks and mortar and the physical rebuilding of the church were only part of what he had been called to do. His calling, in fact, was to rebuild the Church of God across Catholic Europe, at that time in history.

And so, as we look back 800 years, we recall the beginnings of a movement that we now know as the Franciscan Movement. And the life that we're speaking of, of course, is the life of St. Francis, of Assisi.

Now, one of the bedrocks of Francis' life was his reading of the Scripture, in which he read "unless a grain of seed falls to the ground and dies, it bears no fruit."

To this day the third order, of which I'm a member, takes that scripture as the object of our faith. And as we read this morning's two readings from Romans and Matthew, we begin to unpack what that simple scripture reading was all about.

Paul, when he writes to the church in Rome, explains to them that their baptism, and the baptism of every believer, is not simply a ceremony that enables them to belong. It goes much deeper than that.

Paul says that as we are baptised, we go down into the grave and are raised to new life. Our baptism echoes the death of Christ on the cross and His resurrection after three days. It's a promise, a sign, an indicator, that our lives are changed and transformed by our baptism.

Now, as we read, the rest of what Paul writes in Romans, we find that the promise of being raised with Christ does not come without commitment, and without expectation.

If we are indeed given a new life with Christ, then when people look at us our lives should reflect that life of Christ that we seek to mirror. Each day we should be more Christ-like and the character and example of Christ should shape how we live, and who we are.

And it's in our Gospel reading, that Jesus drives the point home for his listeners. He explains that a servant is not greater than their master. He's saying that as followers of Christ, we should expect Nothing less, in our lives, than what occurred in his. And that is incredibly challenging for us.

As we consider what happened in Christ's life, we see the way in which He stood, in opposition sometimes, to the people around him, and the way that they were living.

He spoke with great fervour of the acceptance of God, and he ministered to those who were on the fringes, those who were often socially unacceptable to the people that formed the majority that formed the ruling group within his community.

And this is echoed in what we see within The Franciscan Movement. We hear how Francis was called to embrace a leper. Leprosy in the 13th century, being as socially unacceptable as it was at the time of Christ. And Francis, as he embraced the leper, realised that this new life that Christ was giving him, meant that he was to embrace that which he would find socially difficult, and to welcome the people that he would normally avoid.

The Kingdom of God is made up of all sorts of people. And as we look at these readings, we are commended to be open-minded and open-hearted in our gift of the gospel to those around us.

Returning to our reading from Matthew, we are given one further challenge. We're reminded that when we seek to model the life of Christ; and when we welcome others around us it's possible that we find ourselves in a place where we become incredibly unpopular.

For Francis, he faced ridicule in his lifetime. Christ and the majority of his first 12 disciples faced death for what they sought to model. Because they set themselves up against the society that they were part of. Not in an arrogant way, but in a principled way, where they would say that those who are not important, are actually important to God.

And Jesus said, within families, this is going to cause turmoil, son will be against father, daughter, against mother - because they're saying and doing something that is very different to what their parents believe to be important.

So, this morning's reading is an encouragement to us. It encourages us that we should seek God's opinion, and God's way of life. That we should be building community, and we should be building God's kingdom in a way that reflects what Christ would have done if He had walked on this earth. Even if that makes us a little uncomfortable in the process and puts us with people that we wouldn't naturally feel comfortable with.

Now, this is a very challenging reading, it echoes what Paul writes to the Philippian community, when, in Philippians chapter 2, he says that our example should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who "though he was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something that should be held onto or grasped. Instead, he made himself nothing, becoming... a human being. Taking the form of a man. And then He humbled himself and allowed himself to die the death of scandal. Death on the cross."

And we're told, In the end of that reading in Philippians, that therefore Jesus was exalted by His Father and was lifted up.

So let's remember our readings this morning, summarised in that Franciscan principle that comes from Scripture, "Unless a grain of seed falls to the ground and dies, it bears No fruit."

It is in our submitting to what God would want for our lives, and in our allowing Christ to reshape us, that we truly become Who God intends us to be.

So let's allow our lives to be shaped by His, Let's be open, open-hearted. Keeping our ears open and our eyes open to see whom it is that God is calling us to live alongside and to serve. And to be willing to step out of our comfort zone if necessary. In order to build God's Church and his kingdom here on earth. Amen.