

If ever there was a saint for our times it must be St Francis of Assisi, whose day we keep today. He was born in Italy in 1181 and he is often misunderstood to be something to do with animals or bird-baths or maybe the prayer of St Francis which was written long after his birth (but I think he would like it!)

Born to a wealthy cloth merchant family, Francis could have easily settled down to a comfortable life. But he felt the call of God powerfully on his life. One occasion in particular was to give his whole life direction. As he mused on his calling and what it might mean he approached the ramshackle little church of San Damiano. Behind the altar was a large byzantine crucifix of Christ. As though driven by an inner force he fell to his knees and began to pray intensely “Lord Jesus what do you want me to do? My dreams plague me so, what kind of man do you want me to be?”

Francis lifted his head from the stone floor and looked searchingly into the eyes of the crucifix that seemed now to have such depth, like real eyes. Suddenly the whole face of the Christ seemed to move, and Francis was afraid. Then, as from a faraway place yet surely coming from the cross, a voice clear and resonant pierced his soul, “Francis,” it said, “rebuild my church. Rebuild my church.”

Francis was jubilant. He had some direction at last. He waited for more, but that was it. He searched the face but nothing more was to come. So, he waited for a long time and then thanked Jesus for this clear request. So easy to do. He would start rebuilding the church immediately.

It never occurred to Francis that Jesus was asking anything other than the actual repairing of this church that had fallen into ruin. So, he ran from the little church, and set about collecting stones to rebuild it. His whole mind and energy were now focused almost fanatically on this one project.

This single-minded obedience to the Gospel and the demands of Christ became a pattern for his whole remaining life.

He rejected the wealth of his family and vowed himself to what he called Lady Poverty. In the town square in front of the bishop and his totally rejected and embarrassed father he removed all his clothes. The bishop, to save face, gave him a brown cloak and this became his only possession.

He travelled always on foot around the area preaching a radical commitment to the gospel of Christ. It wasn't long until other young men and women were attracted to his charismatic personality and the simplicity of his message of love.

Francis, having physically rebuilt the tiny church, stumbled on a much deeper meaning. It's one thing to physically rebuild the church but might the church not also need rebuilding spiritually.

For us in this parish we know the truth of these words. When I came as vicar five years ago, it was very clear that the church needed rebuilding. Broken by the earthquakes, the church of St Peter's needed rebuilding. The plans had been drawn up and agreed too, but we needed to raise two and a half million dollars. So like Francis we dedicated ourselves to the task of rebuilding the church. Hard though it is to raise two and a half million dollars and we now only have 400,000 dollars to go, it is much easier to physically rebuild a church than it is to spiritually rebuild the church.

It's hard sometimes to even know how you go about building a congregation. Some churches do it through home groups but always prayer is at the heart. Getting people to commit to praying is a hard task in our world.

Francis prayed a lot. His prayers draw him to closeness with all of creation. He called the sun and moon his brother and sister and saw God's work

in all of nature. Our first hymn was written by St Francis. He was one of the first environmentalists.

The stories of Francis are always delightfully human. On one occasion there was a need to confront an angry wolf that had eaten a number livestock and killed several people in a nearby village. He told his brothers to go and confront the wolf, “It's okay Francis,” they said, “you lead us and we will follow.”

He was also concerned to seek peace. The Christians and Muslims were at war, so he did what nobody else was prepared too or even thought of doing, he went and saw the sultan who was head of the Muslim army. The sultan was very impressed with him and he stayed for many months.

On another occasion he was praying in a cave near his home and felt such a oneness with the suffering of Christ on the cross that he himself took on the wounds of Christ, what we call the stigmata. Holes in his hands and feet and in his side appeared. He was very embarrassed by this and tried to keep it hidden but the brothers spotted it and asked him about it.

Today there are more Franciscans, that is people who have taken on the lifestyle of Francis, than at any other time in history. Our church, the Anglican church, has first order people, that is those who take on the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, or as one brother explained it to me, no pay, no lay, no say. And we also have third order people who are living an ordinary life but who have a rule of life based on the lifestyle of Francis. In our parish we have a number of people who live this third order way.

In Francis we see the life and concerns of Christ lived out. A devotion to the care of the earth, a deep solidarity with and concern for the poor and suffering, a longing for peace, and above all a desire to rebuild the church.

What part of Francis' life resonates for you? Do you have desire for peace in the world, are you concerned with the state of our planet earth? Do you have compassion like him for the suffering?

I believe that Jesus is speaking to us again from the cross, and his words are no different to this generation as to his. Rebuild my church, rebuild my church.