

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, 25 May 2025

Readings: Acts 16.9-15, Psalm 67, Revelation 21.10, 22 - 22.5, John 5.1-9

Lord open ours as you did Lydia's heart long ago to listen eagerly for and to your voice.
Amen. (Acts 6.14)

In John's gospel, Jesus says of himself in summary, I have not come to condemn the world, but that the world might have life through me. Early on in John's gospel, we hear Jesus say of himself speaking in the third person, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." (John 3:17) Later in John's Gospel, Jesus says of Himself, "... for I did not come to condemn the world but to save the world." (John 12.47). A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus testify saying, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) A central message of the Gospel is that God is for us and wants to give us something precious— an abundant life.

During the recent pilgrimage beginning in Ravenna and ending in Florence, at the heart of which was the life of St Francis of Assisi, we also encountered Dante Alighieri and his great poem, The Divine Comedy, which is a mature attempt to think on how to live life after Jesus. Dante said of his poem, as my brother reminded us pilgrims, "it belongs to that part of philosophy called ethics". In the Divine Comedy St Francis is located in canto XI in the Heaven of the Sun of Paradise, and who in Dante's poem is the first Christian since Christ Himself to wed poverty. To grasp what Dante wrote we need to remind ourselves of a verse from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 8.9), For you know the generous act^a of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. Dante writes,

She (Poverty), of her first spouse widowed, had lived through,
Obscure and scorned, twelve centuries, or near,
With never a lover, till he came to woo.

Two stanzas later Dante continues,

But, lest too covertly I should proceed,
Know that in all this tale the lovers' parts
By Francis and Poverty are played.

Remember Dante said of his poem, “it belongs to that part of philosophy called ethics”. In an article by the English sports commentator Roger Alton entitled “How football found God” he writes somewhat bemused about the rise of faith amongst footballers in the Premier League concluding,

“...if I were [football] a manager of 11 God-fearing disciples, I would be extremely happy. The Christian values of unselfishness, teamwork, clean living, moral responsibility and equanimity in the face of triumph or disaster are just what a harmonious team needs.”

With the above in mind, on how to live life after Jesus, we turn our attention to today’s Gospel. We see Jesus in a place full of people on the margins of society. The KJV translates, “In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.” And in our NRSVA translation, “In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed.” It is to this place Beth-zatha Jesus goes and over which the Crusaders would build a church to preserve it. Both can be visited today. In the Gospel narrative we see people again and again coming to Jesus bringing with them their sick ones and asking for healing, to be made whole. Here we have Jesus going to a place where there is suffering. And it is here that Jesus gives power to a man by commanding him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” Restoring him to a full life in community!

I am of a generation in which much was made in evolutionary terms of ‘homo erectus’, who rather than being bent over as previous primates in the chain walked upright, erect. In English there is the phrase ‘walking tall’: to walk confidently, to walk with self-assurance. The man does as he is told. He does stand up. He does take his mat. He does walk. He walks away from the place in which he has been held captive for 38 years. 38 years is a long time to be held captive. Nowadays it can easily be half a lifetime. And this episode set in a place on the margins, a place of concentrated infirmity and long-suffering, a place where people gathered on the edge of society begs a question of each of us. Are you and am I being held captive in some way or other that does not allow us to stand up erect and to walk into the fullness of life that God in Jesus is always inviting us into? What must we forfeit? What must we do? What must we turn from and, as important, what we must turn to?

There is an interesting feature in this pericope, this episode. Did you notice the man does not answer Jesus' question which requires only a simple yes, instead he explains why he has been there all this time. Others are fitter. Others are more agile. Additionally, he has no one who will take him to the waters. He is alone. He is in a place of hope, which for him has become a place of hopelessness. He is trapped. Who will set the captive free? Who will slice the Gordian knot of this seemingly unending imprisonment of hope for him? "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

I am much persuaded by the notion that St Francis was inspired by and built his ministry around an insight that can be neatly summed up in one English word. The word is **infirm**, as in the word infirmary, which is a place in a school, prison, or army camp where sick or injured individuals receive care and treatment. Infirmary is derived from the Latin word infirmus, meaning weak, frail. Infirmus, infirm describes what many people experience, and not only in regard to their health, but I shall begin there. I have, relatively speaking, good health. I have some confidence in my body and its capacity to recover well and fight infections. I don't take this for granted, though I admit to you, brothers and sisters, that I should take care of myself better. Others do not have this kind of confidence. They are, or they feel they are, infirm. This is stifling and affects the way they engage with the world and others.

But please don't use 'infirm' only with regard to physical health. This would be shortsighted. St Francis grew up in a society in which he, as a merchant's son, had status, a status he would renounce. But many people in his time did not have a secure place. They were infirm with regard to their belonging, their wealth, their possessions, ... It is to these Francis will go, beginning with a leper colony outside of Assisi, a colony of the marginalised. He is clear in his mind of the need for repentance, the need to put oneself under Christ, whilst following Christ in all things, making God and God alone the centre of his life and not himself. In loving God who first loved us with a perfect love, we will be given grace in time to love others. Francis' life is always pointing to God and the sacrifices he is willing to make to be a faithful servant of God and not of himself.

Today we find people are infirm in their commitments, their identity, their employment, their career choices, their mental well-being, their friendships, their sense of gratitude, their families, how they value the gift of life, etc. The families in which many people live or are brought up can be described as infirm (dysfunctional). Relationships can give support, provide stability, or they can contribute to being infirm and insecure. Some amongst you witness to me concerning the infirm political regimes from which you come. We all sense how infirm the world is because of political changes and ongoing wars: Congo, Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza/Israel, Ukraine/Russia, each coupled with the impotency of moving to resolutions.

One of the extraordinary things about Francis of Assisi, who can be described as one of God's fools, is that he will go on a peace mission to the Sultan, hoping therewith to end the war between the Crusaders and the Arabs. He is one of God's fools for Christ, and for this, he is remembered, admired, and even now attracts people who will model their lives on his perceiving it to be an authentic way of living a Christ-like life. Francis of Assisi, staying with today's gospel, is someone who followed Jesus' command and its spiritual implications, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Let us do the same as God directs through his Holy Spirit led by the example of Christ that we may come to know what a great gift life is in Christ. **Amen.**