

If you were asked to name anything attributed to St Francis of Assisi, before long someone would mention the prayer of St Francis, that forms the basis of our hymn, ‘Make me a channel of your peace.’ There is another saying attributed to St Francis, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary use words.’

This second saying came to my mind as I reflected on Gospel reading set for today, with a command to welcome and include. This comes after Matthew’s account of Jesus’ demand for allegiance that cuts across ties of family and a call to take up the cross and follow him, adding that those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for his sake will find it.

When we look at our lesson from St Matthew’s Gospel in the light of what precedes it, we see a call to allow our lives to be touched, to be transformed by the Gospel we have received.

C. S. Lewis, a distinguished son of the Church of Ireland, in writing of the influence of his faith on his own life said:

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen:
not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything
else.” *CS Lewis*

The Christ I meet in the Gospels, the Christ I encounter in worship, in prayer, in my fellow Christians illuminates my life. Jesus, In St John’s Gospel, says of himself:

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

John

8:12

As the light of the sun outside enables us to see the wonders of this world, the beauty of flower, of mountain, of sea, the face of one we love, so may the light of Christ enable us, who have been touched by his love, to see the world, and all that is in it, as he would see them. May we look at each other through the eyes of Christ. May we see the poor, the marginalised as he would see them and serve them in his name. As we were thinking last week, may we look on those who have hurt us through the eyes of his forgiving love and be enabled to show something of that some reconciling love. May we look, as he would look, at situations of injustice, whether at home or overseas, may his Church be faithful in its witness to truth and justice.

In this we become not just recipients of his light. For as the moon reflects the light of the sun to light up the night sky, so we are called to reflect the light of Christ in the world. In St Matthew's Gospel, in a passage following closely on the Beatitudes, Jesus tells his followers:

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.
Matt 5:14-16

‘Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary use words.’ In another, very practical piece of advice, St Francis tells his brothers, “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.” We are the ones through whom, in whom Christ not only speaks but walks and acts in the world of today. Unless people experience Christ acting in and through us, they will not hear his words that we speak, however eloquent and polished they may be.

For there is a power to simple witness that transcends words, that empowers any subsequent words. Amidst all the horrors found by troops liberating the concentration camps of the last war, the following prayer was found near the body of a dead child in Ravensbrook concentration camp.

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the sufferings they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering; our comradeship, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this; and when they come to judgement let all the fruits we have born be their forgiveness.

Words that bear witness to a power that has outlasted the awful brutality of Ravensbrook and so many camps like it. Between Christmas and Pentecost we have been reflecting on the story of our redemption, the incarnation, the ministry of word and healing, the life, the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As I said a couple of weeks ago, as we move into the season of Trinity we move into a period of reflection of what this means for us as we seek to respond in word, in deed, in life to his redeeming love.

In words the Bishop often uses in blessing at a Service of Confirmation, may we

Go forth into the world in peace;
be of good courage;
hold fast that which is good;
render to no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak;
help the afflicted; honour everyone;
love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;

and receive the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
and may he remain with us always.

Amen.