

FRANCIS, FRIENDSHIP AND THE FUTURE

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of the Season of Creation

Sunday Oct 1, 2017 - The Very Rev. Ken Gray

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

ENGAGEMENT

Just for fun, let's start with three gameshow type questions: True or False:

- 1) St. Francis produced the first "living nativity" scene in the twelfth century.
- 2) Geologically speaking, we now live in the anthropocene epoch.
- 3) Shopping is the dominant social activity of people living north of the equator.

In a recent article *Climate change and the failure of incarnational nerve* author Norman Wirzba argues that "the dominance of urbanization and the recognition that we are living in the Anthropocene era, when humans are the dominant power influencing the earth's future" are the two most important realities shaping life today. He goes on to say that "the character of modern urban life makes it more difficult for people to have sympathy for anything other than themselves."

Now that all seems rather sad, even pathetic, but I suspect he is correct. The so-called "me generation" is certainly self-absorbed and they are not alone. Try to imagine living two centuries earlier and think about where you might have lived, and how you would have spent both time and

money. Priorities, relationships and expectations would have been very different – maybe better, possibly worse.

Concerning relationships, think about who you would have spent most time with. Likely, just as today, family and friends would top the list of social engagements. Certainly, your use and dependence on technology would be different – more ploughs and candles, less cellphones and motor cars. What about animals? Jerremie Clyde (who was with us last week) uses horses to farm (Clydesdales?) Today, most of us relate to family pets rather than animals in agriculture.

Even in the early middle ages, animals were part of life's fabric though they performed essential functions rather than entertained. Animals were "simply there" to provide for humanity's least, even in the time of St. Francis of Assisi. Wikipedia tells me that Francis spent much of his time preaching about animals, exhorting that all creatures are brothers and sisters under God. Born in 1181 in Italy, St. Francis is today celebrated as Patron Saint of Ecologists. Throughout most of his youth, he served as a soldier, but after a "conversion experience," he renounced his family's wealth and devoted his life to God. Not only did he care for the poor and sick, but he preached multiple sermons on animals, and wanted all creatures on Earth, including humans, to be treated as equals under God.

If Francis in his day drew attention to animals, previously thought secondary to more important aspects of common life, what commands our attention today? Again, Normal Wirzba: "From cellular to atmospheric levels, there is no place or process that does not reflect humanity's technological prowess and economic reach." So we enjoy a sense of dominance over all life's challenges, but, and this is a big but, we

also bear responsibility for the consequences of our actions. And this makes me, and possibly yourself, uncomfortable.

Enter Pope Francis, whose choice of the 12th Century saint's name for his papacy is revealing. The Pope wants us to re-consider our own relationships - with each other, with the non-human world, and more broadly and inclusively with the earth itself which is in his words "our common home." He wants us to do this, not for *fun* or *recreation*, not as an addition to other life priorities, but as a first-order faith conviction and practice. In the encyclical letter LAUDATO SI the Pope writes:

Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.

(The Pope continues) I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.

I recently discovered the Indian Novelist Amitav Ghosh whose book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* currently commands my attention. He extols the value of traditions and practices that will enable us "to transcend the isolation in which humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement" and that will help people "rediscover their kinship with other beings."

Francis could have written those very words – “kinship with other beings” including the earth itself. I think of the organization “Friends of the Earth” which urges good policy in government and good practices for each of us to take up (recently involving bee keeping and management). Could our own friendship, a deep friendship well beyond the superficialities and mechanical connections of Facebook, and go deeper into a new kind of friendship with the earth.

If we have *human friends* we can likewise make *friends with pets* and animals. Beyond animals, *can friendship characterize our relationship with the earth and all creation?* Could our experience of friendship, which incorporates trust, resilience, affection, respect, shared comfort and enjoyment, translate into a new way of sharing with the earth where there is some kind of genuine reciprocity, some give-and-take, some respect?

Here is a prayer I first received a few years ago from NIB Marck MacDonald which embodies the spirit of Francis and I think, the passion of God-in-Trinity:

. . . Let us think of our Mother, the Earth, upon whom we walk and who supports us. We pray we can learn to walk on Her with more respect.

Let us turn our minds to the waters of the world; the great oceans, lakes, rivers and streams. The life that lives in the waters that gives itself up to be our food.

. . . Let us think of all the animals in the world. We give thanks for those that provide food for us and those that provide beauty.

. . . Now let us turn our thoughts to that which is above our world: those helpers placed there by the Creator to ensure our world continues.

. . . Let us thank our Elder Brother the Sun for his light and warmth.

Let us have a special thought for our Grandmother, the Moon, she who regulates the passing of time and the coming of children.

. . . And finally, we take all that we have spoken of, all that we do, and roll them all together and send it the Creator with thanks.

In John's Gospel on the night before he died, Jesus assured both disciples and readers that a relationship of *servanthood* has given way to a relationship of *friendship*. Our liturgy reminds us that "Jesus, at supper with his friends, took bread and wine." When we sing Gospel songs like "What a friend we have in Jesus" we are reminded that we humans are social and relational beings. Our present mistake has been to direct such friendship to other human beings alone, or as the most important priority. God-in-Christ loves not only human beings, but *God so loved the World that he gave his only Son.*"

If sometime our understanding of God is too small, if at other times our appreciation of our Church is too small, then certainly our practice of friendship is often too small. Can we re-consider friendship to include the earth, and adjust our economic, social and relational priorities accordingly? Can we discover a new and life-giving deep friendship, which admittedly, I cannot fully describe because I am still searching?

Possibly, and hopefully, as we close out this years' Season of Creation we can embody a new kind of friendship in our relationships with all God's creation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.