

3rd Sunday of Easter (B) 2015
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

I have just come back from a post-Easter break in Assisi, getting back on Thursday just in time for the start of our annual Novena. I had planned a little pilgrimage to thank God and *il santo poverello* following the resolution of a long standing legal imbroglio. As it turned out the crass inefficiency and incompetence of lawyers ensured that the matter has not been concluded so my purpose was changed to ask the saint to bring the matter to a swift resolution, after three years. When the affair is settled it will make a fascinating homily, if not an intriguing article in a popular journal; or perhaps a best-selling paperback with multi-million dollar Hollywood movie rights rumoured. It would take something like that to make the prolonged torture of the legal maelstrom worthwhile. But more of that at some time in the future.

When I was considering where to go, I quickly dismissed South Africa as too far, too expensive to get to. Once Assisi came to mind alternatives were easily dismissed. I have not been there for many years, not since the appalling earthquake of 1997. I first went there in the 1970's when I was a student and immediately fell for the place. The hill towns of Umbria are all full of character, with inhabited buildings clinging to the hillside and each other at ridiculous angles. But Assisi has an atmosphere which evokes the little poor man who helped rejuvenate the Church of the thirteenth century.

Francis' joy in life, expressed in his all-encompassing sense of fun, makes him one of the most attractive figures of world history. The young party-goer who became a failed soldier who renounced his father's considerable wealth to embrace Gospel-poverty was a hugely popular personality who drew others towards himself, his mad-cap projects and thus to Christ.

Even today, eight hundred years on, he attracts people to his causes. He was an environmentalist, an eco-warrior in today's terminology, which is to say that he was in love with God's creation. He thought of all that God had made as his family, since all shared the same Father. So he sang the praises of 'Brother Sun and Sister moon'; and when faced with a nasty medical procedure to cauterise a tooth (?) which was undertaken with a red-hot knife he asked brother flames not to deal too harshly with him.

This belief in the unity of all that God had made compelled him to work for unity between warring peoples. He travelled to see the Sultan, to try and negotiate peace between the forces of Islam and the Crusaders. It was always a hopeless mission but he impressed Saladin by his joyful personality and utter sincerity of purpose.

We probably know well his song, "*Make me a channel of your peace*". More famous to most of the world is his Canticle of the Creatures, which speaks of "*Brother sun*

and Sister moon". It is a celebration of the family of God's creation. And it was written when Francis was in great pain, close to death, in a rat infested hovel. What to us would be an impossible contradiction was to Francis an continuous expression of God's love.

For alongside his love of nature he meditated for many hours on Christ's suffering. It was said, and it is well authenticated, that he bore in his body the painful marks of Christ's crucifixion-wounds. That makes him sound like a morbid depressive. He was always full of fun, making jokes and singing; he never stopped singing. He maintained excessive poverty which meant sharing everything so no one should be without. His riches were his humour and his companions.

Today's Gospel is a passage I associate with Assisi. It is the Resurrection-Gospel that is proclaimed on Thursday of Easter Week, a day we often went with pilgrims and visitors to Assisi, and whether guiding or preaching I explained Francis in terms of Risen Jesus' words to the disciples: "The Son of Man had to suffer and so enter his glory". This is something Francis would have readily understood. In his age to live meant to suffer. Living was hard business. Backbreaking toil -Francis insisted his friars worked for their upkeep, amid constant ailments without medical care, leading to a painful death before fifty years had passed, if one avoided death in war, or kidnapping into slavery.

Life was harsh for most people, most of the time. But life was God's gift, Francis taught, and we should rejoice in it, whatever the circumstances. And as life departed so Sister-Death was to be welcomed for she led the way to eternal life, free from pain, with Christ.

Generally we live cosseted lives, largely free from physical pain, and the drudgery of work is alien to many of us. The idea that suffering is a necessity is an idea that is difficult to grasp. Yet the image of God with which we are most familiar is that of a crucified man, dying an excruciating death by torture. But that is not the end of the story. The Lord is risen, though the risen Lord bears for all eternity the marks of his suffering, "See my hands and my feet", he tells his disciples. The suffering is never denied; though in Christ it is transformed.