

EMPTYING OUT WITH GOD

Trinity XII

St Michael's, Cornhill

Holy Cross Day

Sunday September 14th 2014

Arezzo is one of the most beautiful towns of Tuscany – and that, of course, is saying quite a lot, remembering the beauty of this marvellous part of Italy. Just outside Arezzo – slightly to the north-east – is a modest manor house-come castle at Montauto. It is called Montauto since the house caps a small hill, a *monte*. To this place in the earlyish part of the thirteenth century, came Francis of Assisi, to break his journey for the night. On his arrival the ladies of the house, who knew Francis, were more than usually disgusted by the fearful state of his brown habit. As he slept, they spirited it away and sewed him a fresh garment.

One can still see the original habit in the museum of the Holy Cross church in Florence. As you can imagine, it has not improved with the eight hundred years that have followed. Holy Cross Day is almost a second patronal feast for Franciscans, alongside October 4th, the day of the saint's death. Franciscan churches worldwide are dedicated to the Holy Cross and so this very day is their patronal feast. It is not difficult to see why the cross is so central to the Franciscan way, for Francis himself was dedicated entirely to his crucified Lord. His story is well known.

Let me remind you briefly, however, of just a few of the key moments. The son of a wealthy cloth retailer – a *draper* to boot – Francis Bernadone was a troubadour and playboy. In his early twenties he underwent a significant and powerful experience. His faith was rekindled and deepened. Relations with his rich and wordly father deteriorated and tradition has it that Francis stripped off his finery and stood naked before his father and others in the central piazza of Assisi and became a beggar, a mendicant. Understandably his father was furious and even humiliated by this.

Francis had prayed in the tiny church of San Damiano on the edge of Assisi and Christ spoke to him from the crucifix there; you can still see both church and crucifix, although now they are separated from each other, the crucifix now hanging in the church of Santa Chiara. Christ said to Francis just four words: 'Francis, rebuild my church.' Francis set out to do this, both literally and metaphorically. He rebuilt, with his own hands, the tiny church of the Porziuncula, the Little Portion, now enshrined in the great basilica of St Mary of the Angels – just nearby to Assisi. Around Francis gathered a community which grew exponentially. In his lifetime which was short – he died at the age of forty four – thousands became friars and they even reached these shores in 1221, four years before Francis' death.

Francis cared for lepers, for the poor, for the outcast. He spent hours in silent prayer in hermitages up and down the Italian Apennines. In one of these, at La Verna, on an outstretched piece of jagged rock, he received the Stigmata, the wounds of Christ, having spent the rest of the night in prayer. Francis is one of the most compelling examples of literal discipleship of his master. He gave up everything to follow Jesus. Doubtless impossible and challenging to a fault, nonetheless, Francis captured the spirit of Jesus.

Today's three readings are all pretty dramatic. From Numbers we encountered Moses and the fiery serpents of ancient Israel. Then there is the gospel passage including that most famous of quotations: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoso believeth in him should have everlasting life.' But this morning, it is on the epistle that I'd like to focus for a moment. For the letter to the Philippians, one of the earlier writings in the New Testament, includes a still earlier Christian hymn. You will all remember the words:

'Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. . . ?

The key phrase there is *emptying himself*. In Greek, emptying is *Kenosis*. In Jesus, God empties himself to become a human being, one of us. But, of course, only a cursory glance at the pattern of life which unfolded in Jesus saw yet a further self-emptying. Jesus' own life was one of self-giving. It was a pattern which was beyond what others could cope with and so he had to go - so to speak. That led to the final self-emptying, to crucifixion on the Holy Cross.

This day, we remember both God's *Kenosis*, *God's* emptying of himself, and then *Jesus'* *Kenosis*, Jesus empties himself, of his *id* as Freud would have put it – that is of the pushing and combative side of his humanity – so this day packs a powerful message. Francis saw that and undoubtedly did *transform* and *rebuilt* God's Church. It did not always bring him friends, as indeed was the case with his beloved Master, Jesus himself. But it leaves us in no doubt that at the heart of Christian living lies this *Kenosis*, this self-emptying. We have seen it over two thousand years vividly in just a few people. Even in our own time we have seen it happen. Think of Maximilian Kolbe, for example, who swapped with a man on 'death row' in Auschwitz – he gave himself that the other man might live.

Many years ago I stayed, slightly against my better judgment, at a Franciscan friary. It changed my life. It was a key moment in leading me towards ordination. In countless ways I've failed to live up to that. But I remain part of the Franciscan order still – and when I least want it to, it reminds me of what today, Holy Cross Day, is all about. It is about God emptying himself and calling us to pattern our lives after that of Christ Jesus. How will it convict us this time? What are we to do?

Amen.

Readings:

Numbers. 21. 4-9.

Philippians. 2. 6-11.

John. 3. 13-17.

Numbers. 21. 4-9.

4. And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.

5 And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.

6 And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.

7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.

8 And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.

Philippians. 2. 6-11.

6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

John. 3. 13-17.

13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.