

Brancepeth sermon
4 October 2026

Galatians 6.14-18

Luke 12.22-34

Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Creatures*

May I speak in the name of God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen.

Eight hundred years ago yesterday,

on the 3rd of October 1226,

Francis of Assisi died surrounded by his companions;

he prayed with them, read scriptures with them,

and then – as an account written only a year or two later says –

‘his most holy soul was released from the flesh

and absorbed into the abyss of light,

and his body fell asleep in the Lord’.

Such was the impact that Francis had
on the people around him
that within just two years he had been declared a saint.
But he was more than just one more saint
taking up a day in the church's calendar;
before another century had gone by,
he was regularly being talked about as something more.
In language that sounds shocking
and perhaps even blasphemous,
he was being called, in Latin, *alter Christus* –
that is 'another Christ' or 'a second Christ'.

I find *that* language very hard to swallow;
I'm not sure we should be talking about anyone in those terms,
however remarkable, however devout.
But I want to talk this morning about what people *meant*
by calling Francis that,
and why it might have made sense –
why it might have caught hold of an important truth.

It's necessary to say, right at the start,
that those who called Francis 'a second Christ'
didn't mean for one moment
to deny the uniqueness of Jesus' life and work;
they didn't mean to say that Francis was God incarnate,
that Francis died for the sins of the world,
or that Francis should be worshipped.
There point was not to deny the uniqueness of Jesus at all.

You might say, rather, that they saw Francis as a *cover version* of Jesus.
So, in the same way that Nina Simone, say, sang a *cover version*
of the Beatles' song 'Here comes the sun',
Francis was for his followers a *cover version* of Jesus,
his life playing again the song that Jesus had written with *his* life.

Or even more clearly, you could say that Francis was a *tribute band*
performing Jesus' music.

After all, a tribute band doesn't claim to be
greater than the band they cover;
they don't claim to supplant them in people's affections;
they don't claim to have created the music they play.

They are, precisely, a *tribute* band:

they are there to pay tribute to, to *honour* the original.

People listen to them and celebrate them

precisely because they *love* the original,

not because they want to leave the original behind.

The tribute band's fame is rightly and properly

a wholly *derivative* matter;

it is derived from, it depends on, it rests upon the fame of the original.

Just so with Francis and Jesus.

People came to see Francis as someone whose life was a

performance of the song first performed by Jesus,

the song created by Jesus;

people came to Francis to hear that song played again

in a distinctive way, with its own character and context,

a version that highlighted some aspects of the original,

even if it couldn't do justice to all of them.

It was, of course, an imperfect performance –

Francis himself would have been the first to insist on that –

but it was an *authentic* performance nonetheless:

a re-playing, a re-showing, a re-telling of the story of Jesus,
in a way that the people of Francis' day found compelling.

And such re-playing, re-showing, re-telling of the story of Jesus
has an important part to play in the life of the church.

Paul, in one of his letters to the Christians in Corinth,
says to them, 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ':

You be imitators of me as I am an imitator of Christ.

That is: Paul knew that his *words* would have only a limited power
to show people what it meant to follow Jesus,
and so he urged them to look also at how he *lived* -
to see how *he*, for all his faults,
was nevertheless an imitation, a facsimile, a reproduction of Jesus.

And Francis' followers saw him the same way:

Let's be imitators of Francis, they said,
just as he was an imitator of Christ.

Let's be imitators of Francis *because*
he was an imitator of Christ.

That I think, is what they meant by calling him *alter Christus*.

But what was it about Francis that made people think of him like that?

Well some of it was to do with practical details of his story:

the fact that he gathered a band of disciples, for instance, or
that he had an itinerant ministry, walking from place to place.

People saw there an echo of the gospel stories of Jesus.

But it went deeper than that, too.

Because they saw in Francis someone utterly caught up in,
utterly taken over by, the love of God.

There were any number of aspects of that.

He was someone who –

however much he sometimes struggled to accept it

at an emotional level –

was captivated by the knowledge of God's love.

He was someone who knew (as Jesus had taught)

that he could not add a day to his life by worry;

but that he could and should trust completely

the same God who fed the sparrows and painted the lilies,

who gave us brother sun and sister moon

to light our days and nights.

He was someone who wanted to serve Jesus with his whole life,
and to do so above all by serving all those whom Jesus loved,
pouring out to others the love that he had himself received.

And so he devoted himself to caring for the outcasts of his day,
working amongst lepers and others who were considered untouchable;
he gave lavishly to those in need,
selling *everything* that he owned
(and even some things that he did not own)
so that he could give more and more –
refusing to accumulate wealth
while there were still *any* who had nothing to their name.

He lived –
to a degree that his companions and followers found remarkable –
a life that rang with the kind of teaching of Jesus
that we heard in our gospel reading:
a life that shone with the trust of Jesus, the care of Jesus,
the love of Jesus.

It was in *that* sense that he was an ‘alter Christus’,
another Christ: a tribute band to Christ,
someone whose life proclaimed Jesus with unusual intensity and joy.

There was another element of this, as well, however.
He was someone who knew that, in a world like ours,
becoming more like Jesus –
being filled more with the love of Jesus,
living out that love of Jesus towards others –
inevitably brings you into conflict with the world as it is.
He knew that it would almost certainly lead him into suffering,
that it would involve a kind of *dying* to this world,
a kind of dying to the *ways* of this world,
a kind of dying to the *values* by which this world runs.

Paul, in the reading we heard earlier,
says that ‘the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world’,
and he speaks about ‘carrying the marks of Jesus branded on my body’,

and he is probably referring to the scars he has been left with
by the rough treatment he's had at the hand of
the Roman authorities and various mobs
who took exception to his teaching.

Becoming someone whose life displays the life of Jesus
involves this too, this marking or scarring.

And this was true of Francis.

It was true at the very end of his life in a quite specific way:
he developed, in his final days, wounds in his hands and feet
that mirrored the wounds of Christ:
the so-called 'stigmata'.

But that was just a surface image of a deeper truth about him.

The process by which he had learnt to be a follower of Jesus,
an imitator of Jesus, a singer of Jesus' song,
had been a struggle, and it had been painful.

It broke family relationships, involving, for instance,
a complete breakdown of his relationship with his father.

It required him to give up much that he had valued and enjoyed:
his wealth, his lifestyle, his standing in society.

And even though he did experience the love of God
and was often filled with the assurance of that love
for himself and for all his fellow creatures,
he also, as someone who had left all earthly security behind,
struggled with depression.

And so, yes, he, too, like Paul,
carried the marks of Jesus branded on his body,
and etched into his spirit.

I still find it difficult language to use,
calling Francis ‘another Christ’ or a ‘second Christ’.

It doesn’t come naturally to me
and I worry that it’s much too easy to misinterpret.

But if, with caution, handling it really gingerly,
we allow ourselves to use this term,

I think Francis would want us to say something *more*
than that Francis *himself* was another Christ.

I think – if you’ll forgive me saying something
so open to misinterpretation –

I think we have to say that God wants *you*
to be another Christ, too;

God wants *me* to be another Christ;

God wants each of us, every single person here,
to become an imitator of Christ.

God wants each of us to become a *tribute band* to Christ,
to sing a *cover version* of his song.

That is not a status reserved for some coterie of super-saints;
it is a calling for all of us,
however ordinary we might be.

We are all meant to be people who,
whatever we manage to say in our words,
live lives filled with the love of Jesus,
live lives that echo with the love of Jesus,

and so live lives that proclaim the love of Jesus
to one another and to the world around us.

We are meant to be people who are imitators of Francis,
imitators of Paul, imitators of all God's saints,
insofar as they themselves are imitators of Christ;

God even wants us to imitate *each other*
when we see from each other some hint or spark
of what Christ's love means,
some hint or spark of Christ's kindness, of Christ's mercy,
some hint or spark of Christ's reckless welcome,
some hint or spark of Christ's willingness to give up everything
for the sake of the kingdom.

Francis of Assisi remains, eight hundred years after his death,
a reminder that God wants each of us to be a canvas
on which *something* of the face of Christ
is painted, for all the world to see.

And as we remember his death, let us pray for such a life.

Amen.