

Sermon, Peel Cathedral, Sunday 2ct October 2022 – St Francis

Readings: Galatians 1: 13-end; Luke 10: 38-end

How an elephant can help us to see more clearly

When I was a child I remember being fascinated by a set of black and white photographs that must have been given to my parents as a present. They were in a small flat box, about 6" square. As I studied at them, I couldn't work out what I was seeing. They were puzzles – ordinary objects taken from unusual angles, often at a big magnification. Even when told what they were supposed to be, I couldn't always work it out.

They came to mind as I was thinking about our readings, and about St Francis who we remember today as we come towards the end of Creationtide – an opportunity for us to celebrate the beautiful world around us, and to consider how we can act as worthy stewards, so that its resources are available for all who need them.

Over the last twenty years there has been a growing awareness of the fragility of the earth, and a wide range of responses – from climate change deniers on one extreme to Extinction Rebellion on the other. It must be true that here amongst ourselves there is a variety of different opinions on these issues.

I was thinking about the pictures because they challenged me to really look, and to question – and to marvel. And these are useful tools for all of us. It is very easy to hold on to which ever attitudes we have and be reluctant to change. And it's not just about environmental issues.

Our views of the world are shaped by many different factors, with our family values and backgrounds being particularly formative. And then all the experiences we've had since; the people we've met, the places we've been, the situations we've been in, the different aspects of employment – let alone national politics and international events.

As Christians we have our faith, principles from the Bible and input from people whose studies and understanding is greater than ours. Of course, it doesn't mean we all agree! But if our faith is alive and well we should be willing to consider new viewpoints. After all, it is unlikely that anyone person has all the truth. Let me show you what I mean. If I hold a book like this, you can only see its long edge; if I hold it like this, the short edge; If I hold it like this, some people will see the short edge and some the long edge: or like this – the cover (front or back). And in the case of this particular object, we can only begin to appreciate it properly when we look inside and read it.

The possibility of looking at things from different viewpoints, and of being willing to change our minds is vital to our faith. After all, at some point we had to decide that we believed in Jesus and wanted to follow him. And I hope that change of mind led to changes in behaviour – it would be odd if it didn't.

In our Gospel, it's interesting to see how Martha was so sure she was right she asked Jesus to make her sister Mary see how wrong she was and make her help with the practical jobs. Martha

must have been surprised, disappointed and upset by his response. And the situation between the two sisters has been a continuing source of controversy ever since! Or take Paul; – what a lifestyle change he experienced when he responded to Jesus, whose voice he heard so clearly on his way to Damascus. Our reading from Galatians tells of the years it took to work out the implications of his new found faith.

And Francis of Assisi found just the same. As a young man Francis had a whale of a time. He joined his wealthy father in the cloth trade and was a ring leader of local youths, enjoying spending money. He wasn't without empathy, on one occasion giving a beggar all the money in his pocket, much to his father's anger. He enrolled as a soldier, experiencing captivity and ill health. Still in his early 20s while on his way to join the Papal forces, he had a powerful dream which caused him to return to Assisi. There, in solitude and prayer, he sought the will of God.

While he was praying in a ruined chapel just outside the town he too heard a voice – it came from the crucifix above the altar. It commanded him: "Go, Francis, and repair my house which, as you see, is well-nigh in ruins."

And he set to work to do just that, beginning with stones and mortar. Fired by the example of Jesus, his desire was to follow his teachings and to walk in his footsteps. For him this meant embracing a life of poverty. He acquired a basic rough peasant's tunic, knotted a rope around his waist and went round preaching contrition, brother love and peace.

His authenticity drew others to join him and by the time he was thirty the Pope had agreed to his new monastic order – the Franciscans, and one he founded for women which became known as the Poor Clares.

At that time orthodox church teaching was that anything that was not God – or otherworldly – was evil. This included the natural world which was considered material and therefore nothing more than distraction and temptation, luring souls off the path of righteousness. Francis instead claimed that the natural world was given to us as a gift from God, and was therefore not only good, but imbued with God himself. Nature should not be shunned and ignored, but celebrated and revered. And that human beings were not here to dominate and control nature (Genesis 1:26), but to live with it in harmony. For him, man was no more important than the ant but no less important than the elephant.

This thinking led to him calling all creatures his brothers and sisters, and also to regard the serious illnesses that he experienced – and even death – as his sisters.

St Francis's world view, at that time refreshingly different, has helped to shape our thinking today, even if many of us struggle to think of difficult experiences as close relatives. The world is changing all of the time but it may be that we haven't taken much opportunity to consider our own view of it. If there are any things we can learn from our brief consideration of glimpses into the lives of Paul, Mary, Martha and Francis, I'd like to think they could include:

- Being prepared to speak out like Martha did when she thought things were unfair;
- Having a willingness, like Mary, to really listen to other people

- Taking time to understand our faith, like Paul.
- Imitate the life of Christ, like St Francis

The puzzle pictures taught me to really look, to question – and to marvel. The image of the book reminds us that even a familiar object can be seen from different viewpoints. And an ancient Indian parable illustrates even more clearly the importance of a willingness to learn not just from observation but also by interacting with those who think differently from ourselves.

A group of blind men heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to the town. Out of curiosity, they said: "We may not be able to see, but we can feel so let's go and inspect it". When they found it they groped about it. The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said, "This being is like a thick snake". For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The blind man who placed his hand upon its side said the elephant, "is a wall". Another who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is hard, smooth and like a spear.

Whilst each person's experience was true and valid, none of the six ended up with an accurate understanding of what an elephant is like. Between us we have enormous experience of life and faith. Our individual stories are weaving together to present a beautiful picture of God's love. Let us embrace our differences and engage with each other to increase our understanding and work together to build the Kingdom of God.

Amen

References

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