
Christ-like Francis

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
St. Francis Day – Year C

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There's something startling about our collect appointed for today's Feast of St. Francis—our collective opening prayer that we prayed at the beginning of the service. Did you catch it in that second line?

Most high, omnipotent, good Lord, grant your people grace to renounce gladly the vanities of this world; that, following the way of blessed Francis...

That's it—right there—that one phrase: “following the way of blessed Francis.” *Following the way of blessed Francis?* Can you believe your ears? By contrast, back in Easter season we prayed this more orthodox Collect:

Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be *the way*,
the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his
steps in *the way* that leads to eternal life...

That was the Collect appointed for the Fifth Sunday of Easter in our *Book of Common Prayer* (p.225). And it's about as theologically correct as we can get, of course. Actually it's a quotation from holy scripture. You will recognize it in the Gospel of John, where Thomas says to Jesus during the Last Supper:

“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

And Jesus answers him with one of those awesome and majestic “I am” statements that we hear so often in John's gospel:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:5-6)

So how is it that we pray in today's collect appointed for this Feast of St. Francis, “grant your people grace ... to follow the way of blessed Francis?”

The answer is quite astounding: it's that the human being we call St. Francis of Assisi so identified himself with the character and works of Jesus that he has been called a Second Christ; literally in the Latin phrase, *alter Christus*—or another Christ.

“The belief that St. Francis was truly a second, alternative Christ, originated ... for the first time in the legends which gathered around the saint in the early 14th century.” H. W. van Os, “St. Francis of Assisi as a Second Christ in Early Italian Painting,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* Vol. 7, No. 3 (1974), pp. 115-132 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3780297>. Van Os cites as his source: Stanislao da Campagnola, *L'angelo de/ sesto s, gillo e /alter Christus*, Rome 1971; pp. 202-205. In addition van Os notes: “[This is] the first and only systematic and thorough study of the *Franciscus alter Christus* theme (see also the review by S. Gieben in *Collectanea Franciscana* 43 [1973], pp. 423-25). Another important work on the subject is E. Benz, *Ecclesia spiritualis, Kirchenidee und Geschichtstheologie der franziskanischen Reformation*, Stuttgart 1934.”

What is this fascination with Francis that makes him such an icon for us? The famous Christian commentator or apologist, G.K. Chesterton, accounts for it by saying that it's easier to gaze upon the moon than look directly at the sun. With those metaphors he also evoked the popular Franciscan symbols of sun and moon. Chesterton wrote:

Saint Francis is the mirror of Christ rather as the moon is the mirror of the sun. The moon is much smaller than the sun, but it is also much nearer to us; and being less vivid it is more visible. Exactly in the same sense Saint Francis is nearer to us, and being a mere man like ourselves is in that sense more imaginable.

Quoting the 8th chapter of G.K. Chesterton's biography of St. Francis of Assisi and posted by Fr. Ryan Erlenbush on October 4, 2012 and accessed October 1, 2016 at: <http://newtheologicalmovement.blogspot.com/2012/10/christ-was-like-st-francis.html>

Now I have a different comparison to offer for gazing upon St. Francis and his "way" of being Christ-like. I'm an old fan of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. You probably know about this epic fantasy about the small hobbit Frodo and Frodo's great mission to destroy the ring of power that belongs to the Lord of evil. My comparison between Christ and St. Francis as a second Christ is to compare the more ordinary hobbits to the more powerful wizard, Gandalf, or to the more noble elf-Queen, Galadriel.

In the novel itself this is how two of the hobbits talking among themselves describe that comparison:

"Dear me! ... we can't live long on the heights."

"No," said Merry. "I can't. Not yet, at any rate. But at least, Pippin, we can now see them, and honour them. It is best to love first what you are fitted to love, I suppose: you must start somewhere and have some roots, and the soil of the Shire is deep. Still there are things deeper and higher; and not [one of us] could tend his garden in what he calls peace but for them, whether he knows about them or not."

[J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*; http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/327530-dear-me-we-took-and-brandybucks-we-can-t-live-long](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/327530-dear-me-we-took-and-brandybucks-we-can-t-live-long)

"Whether he knows about [things deeper and higher] or not." Well, precisely on that point—about living long on the heights—our gospel reading appointed for this Feast of St. Francis insists on our knowing the higher things:

Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

And then, right after comparing his disciples to "infants" by contrast with "the wise and the intelligent," Jesus goes on to exalt us "infants" to his own level—to his level of intimacy with his heavenly Father:

"All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Now right here Jesus declares that those to whom he chooses to reveal the Godhead are invited to know God comparably as Jesus himself knows God! That level of knowledge is truly awesome, and I'll return to it in a minute. But first: today's gospel concludes with Jesus stating two conditions for us disciples acquiring that intimacy and that knowledge:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

That's right: "Come to Jesus!" as we say in our more evangelical churches nowadays. 'Come to Jesus' is the first step in this 'way' of becoming like Jesus, Christ-like in the way that St. Francis himself became another Christ. And then the second step sounds easy but in an ironic way:

"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:25–30

Well right here our remaining scriptures appointed for this day tell us what it takes to bear that 'easy yoke' and its so-called 'light burden.' Here's the description of that yoke and that burden in our alternate Old Testament reading. Instead of reading from Genesis we also have appointed this alternate reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Notice what

Jeremiah says about knowing God:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice;

who makes his neighbors work for nothing,
and does not give them their wages ...

Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.

He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well.

Is not this to know me?
says the Lord.

Jeremiah 22:13–16

So there's the question: Isn't this what it means to know God? Or in terms of our Franciscan theme appointed for today: Isn't this the way to be Christ-like ourselves, by judging rightly "the cause of the poor and needy?" And we don't need to be a judge or in a position of power to "judge rightly" about the poor and needy. We can judge rightly about the poor and needy while listening to the news or walking the streets.

Now that's the theme we see in the life of St. Francis himself, who coined the term, "Lady Poverty," as a way to express his devotion and commitment to the lives of 'the poor and needy.' In the same way that many of us celebrate our national freedoms by paying tribute to the Statue of Liberty as our "Lady Liberty," so Francis honored a commitment to Lady Poverty. And while Francis fully lived out that commitment we can, for our part, at least honor it ourselves.

Finally we turn to the remaining reading—the epistle where the apostle Paul gives his account of following Christ. Now Paul's image of crucifixion may seem forbidding at first. But notice how he focuses that image on the creation of new life; that is, on resurrection:

May I never boast of anything [except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule -- peace be upon them, and mercy ...

Galatians 6:14–16

Well there it is: our 'yoke will be easy' and our 'burden light' if—repeat *if*—in crucifying ourselves to the world and the world to ourselves we do so not by means of external observances such as circumcision, or by going to the very opposite observances such as uncircumcision. Rather the goal is new life or new creation. And precisely here we come back full circle to St. Francis as our Christ-like lover of all creation—both an iconic lover of animals but also a patron saint of the poor and needy.

Thus we arrive at the end with an inclusive embrace of the creation that the "vanities of this world" leave outside their own boundaries of care and devotion. Rather let's become more Christ-like ourselves, that like blessed Francis we may find the grace that is invoked in our Collect this day: 'the grace to renounce gladly the vanities of this world; that, following the way of blessed Francis, we may—for love of the One who is our Most high, omnipotent, good Lord—delight in the whole creation with perfectness of joy.'

Amen!

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