

St Francis- a man for today?

The days and weeks seem to be blending into one as we continue to journey through this period of isolation and social distancing. It is proving to be increasingly difficult to keep a track of our routines and structures when we have both our hands tied behind our back with the restrictions that have been put in place.

Many have been furloughed, many more are beginning to think about what the future holds for them and their families as they ponder the consequences of the virus, not just on society but on the economy. Listening to a journalist named Peter Hitchens he asserts that the equivalent money for a brand new fully furnished hospital is daily being thrown into the sea because of the lockdowns effect on the economy. Many are beginning to pose the dichotomy- do we choose health or wealth?

It is a stark choice to make and no doubt there is a path down the middle that can be pursued but ones thoughts are starting to follow Mr. Hitchens in fearing for the state of the economy. It matters not how many times a week we go outside and clap for the NHS but if we don't have a healthy economy we cannot have a compassionate society. We cannot hope to keep our health care, education and social care programs running if we do not have an economy to fund these programs.

The elevation of the economy should be kept in perspective; the Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath. The economy is made for us not us for the economy. Perhaps a good number of us have forgotten which way round this relationship should have been. The world that existed before the outbreak encouraged us to see ourselves as the servants of the economy, neglecting God, family, friends and love in efforts to keep our heads above the water. This is understandable and there is no condemnation in this as we all to greater or lesser extents have been forced to do this. We do not know what world will emerge after this virus has wrought its worst upon us. If we are being honest, knowing human nature, we can predict that after the restrictions are lifted things will return to what they were before in a blink of an eye. The world has slowed down for a brief lucid moment but once the restrictions are lifted flights around the world will resume, pollution will spike and the rat race will continue with its typical disdain for the lowly and vulnerable.

So how do we reflect as Christians upon our situation now and prepare for the start of the race when the restrictions are lifted. We are lucky in having 2000 years of Christian women and men who have sought to identify and respond to similar tremors in the world that they inhabited. The truth is that Christianity has been at its most potent when it was a counter cultural movement. By counter cultural I don't mean walking around the high street wearing T-Shirts of Che Guevara, I mean the articulation of a more fundamental value structure. The success of Christianity in the past meant that its counter cultural value structure paradoxically become the value structure of the Empires of the west; for more on this see last week's article and read Tom Holland's Dominion.

Our post-modern society is an example of the maxim 'all the fruits none of the roots'. Any

Christian movement that seeks to find new ways of articulating its values in the post corona world will have to be all about the roots so that with grace we may get the fruits.

So what are the roots to our counter cultural movement? As previously mentioned we have examples of Christian lives to fall back upon. None are proving more inspiring to me presently than the proto-hippy Francis from the town of Assisi.

I know that we cannot make direct correlations, Francis belonged to an age that is different from of our own but through our common faith there is that most blessed continuity. Many books have and will be written about Francis, more than I can say in the remaining 400 words or so but let his life speak to us in answer to our response to the virus emergency. We were told in life that you are born with nothing and as you progress your goal is to accrue and possess and looking back over the course of one's life you can see what you have achieved, accumulated and built. To understand Francis simply invert that understanding completely. You are born with every gift of creation at your disposal. The task of one's life is to know what things we can live without. As one looks back on their life one is to see how much they have simplified, rationalized and made space within, so that you can encounter the love of God.

For many of us born into a culture which advertises the former it is hard to get our understanding to be like Francis. The best I've heard it explained is that we are on a long and wearisome road, the lighter the load on your back, the lighter your steps upon your path home will be.

Home is an important concept for Francis. Our journey through this life is one of origin in God and therefore unity in Him. We exist in this world for a short time amidst all the multiplicity and complexion of life and our task is to return home, to unity with all that is. This is why Francis preached to birds and addressed all creation as family, because he believed that both he and they shared the same origin and shared the same end.

I will finish with some words from Francis himself:

“Jesus Christ, I pray that the fiery and honey-sweet power of your love
may remove my soul from all things under heaven,
so that I may die from the love of your love,
who out of love for your people
did die upon the tree”

Francis first came to understand his need for Christ when he met a leper on the road, or to frame it another way when he was confronted with disease and sickness.

Most of us will have to learn to live with less than we have been used to. For some that will be an affront that will require a life's times work to ameliorate, but maybe for others and particularly for the Church, it might just be the invitation from God to genuine renewal.