

St. Francis of Assisi: A 13th century role model for 21st century creation care.

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St. Francis of Assisi is perhaps the most cohesive Christian example of care for the environment, appealing to all through his love of the natural world, beautifully extolled in his prayers and poetry. The image of St. Francis is depicted in a stained glass window created for All Saints', Nettleham by Charles E. Kempe, showing the Saint preaching to birds and animals. Having been seriously damaged in the 1950s, the fragments were taken away following a serious fire, which caused extensive damage to the Church. These fragments remained in the workshop of John Hayward until they were returned in 2007. Remarkably the central image of St Francis had survived, along with a bird. The window panel was restored to the Church last year and is the initial inspiration behind these thoughts on creation care.

One of the central tenants of Franciscan creation care is of the equality of all creation. This equality is such, that non-human creation does not need human assistance to praise God; indeed, the simple presence of non-human creation serves to praise God. Just because we humans are often not able to interpret the praise they render, it does not mean it is not rendered. Furthermore, the inability of humanity to hear it does not reveal a limitation on the behalf of non-human creation, but on the part of humanity. It is we who have been given the tools of sight, speech, thought and understanding, and we have the duty to use them to further extol the glory of God. St. Francis created canticles entitled *Praises of the Creatures*, of which only the *Canticle of the Sun* survives. In this Canticle St. Francis suggests that the sun praises God through the light he emits, reflecting the brightness of the glory of God.

*Praise be to Thee, my Lord, with all Thy creatures,
Especially to my worshipful brother sun,
That which lights up the day, and through him dost Thou brightness give;
And beautiful is he and radiant with splendour great;
Of Thee, most High, signification gives.*

This message of equality is subtly, but crucially different other creation care mandates. Arguably the most popular word associated with the human role of creation care is that of 'stewardship'. Stewardship can mean many things, to many people, however the most common interpretation presents humankind's role to care for the Earth and all creation on behalf of Creator God. At first glance this seems similar to that of the Franciscan ideals. However, stewardship, through its ideal of a human intermediary to God on behalf of creation, enables humanity to raise itself above and beyond the rest of the created order, and therefore, moves away from the ideal of equality amongst all creation. This enables us to give ourselves a greater importance in the eyes of God, separating ourselves from the rest of creation. Arguably we are the pinnacles of God's creation, made in the image of God, however, we are still a part of the totality of creation. Therefore, the romanticised image of a holy man who talked to animals can at best obscure the strength of his message of creation care.

How should the ministry of St. Francis speak to us today, in a time when we are in much need of inspiration and guidance on our role in creation care? St. Francis was a radical figure in his time, however he should be a revolutionary example of creation care in the 21st century, when environmental crises are well understood and communicated. By reminding us of the ability of non-human creation to praise God, through their very existence, this should renew our efforts to protect our natural environment. This can be achieved through our great appreciation and value of what we have around us; we should regard a field of wild flowers as an act of praise to God, rather than simply a human opportunity (whether negative or positive). The inspiration that St. Francis gives us today should be that of a 'green apostle', a visionary in our local parishes and wider communities bringing the message of creation care to the fore. As St. Paul says to the Galatians, an Apostle is not appointed by or through human beings, but through Jesus Christ and his Father, who raised him from the dead (Gal. 1:1). If we are to recognise and encourage 'green apostles' we have to validate their mission and ministry as God given. The message that they bring to us will be hard to hear and even harder to follow, but it is vital that we listen and take action. Changing our environmental behaviour and understanding will only come about in a long-lasting and meaningful way if we change our belief in the importance of non-human creation. A re-examination of the life and teachings of St. Francis of Assisi can provide us with the model of all creation praising God,

whether or not humanity can appreciate that worship. Looking at the image of a 13th century 'green apostle' in the window at All Saints', Nettleham we should be further inspired to continue to care for our damaged world. The symbolism of beautiful, fragile glass, remembered and rediscovered should give us further inspiration to follow the example of St Francis, and enable a rediscovery and renewal of our relationship with creation and our common Creator.