

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity
Micah 6: 6-8; Galatians 6: 1-3; Luke 12: 22-34
<i>'Francis, Dickens & Austen'</i> Michael Brown (Lay Reader)

Personal Introduction

Many years ago on a sunny Summer Sunday, Jackie and I went over to Durham for Cathedral Evensong. Stanley and Doreen had the same idea and so it was that we sat with them. At the end of the glorious service, Stanley pointed out to me a retired bishop who was sat not far away from us. This was the former Bishop of Ripon John Moorman. Some time later I discovered that not only was John Moorman married to Mary Trevelyan of the Trevelyan family from Wallington, he was also a leading expert on Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan movement. And so the mention of St Francis reminds me of a dear work colleague and friend.

Today's Readings

A special selection made by the Society of St. Francis for this Lesser Feast Day. This script looks only at the first of these readings each of which could provide plenty of material for reflection.

Micah 6: 6-8

This passage contains a well known verse:

“and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

What is the connection here between justice and mercy? Is it a choice between justice and mercy - only one of the two. Definitely not. Is it a choice of justice and mercy - both of them. Almost, but not quite. The answer is this: justice without mercy may not be real justice at all.

The BBC serial *Dickensian* imagines what many characters from Dickens might have been doing before they appeared in his novels - fiction about fiction! In the opening episode Scrooge's partner Jacob Marley is murdered. Much of the serial concerns the efforts of Inspector Bucket to apprehend the killer. After false starts he discovers evidence that Emily Cratchit is the unlikely culprit, confronts her and she confesses; but all this does is present him with a moral dilemma.

Marley was known to be an abuser of women. Emily had killed him in self-defence when he tried to assault her. What is more, the police have beaten a confession out of an evil person known as Manning who didn't kill Marley but who freely admits and rejoices in the fact that he has killed several other people. The Victorian legal system will find Manning guilty and hang him but Emily will probably also suffer the same fate in that she will be unlikely to succeed in a plea of self-defence.

The inspector is dedicated to the objective pursuit of justice but he sees that the two cases are not the same; in particular, the loss of Emily will in effect destroy the Cratchit family. He takes her to the police station but confronted with a scene of fighting people which resembles something out of Dante's *Inferno*, he hurries her out and tells her to go home. In this case, by the exercise of mercy, justice is done without the accused even being brought to trial.

Now we might say, "Fine, but this isn't relevant to us because today the law recognises pleas of self-defence in a different way." True, but how often do we hear of people demanding the full sentence of the law as the automatic outcome of every trial which would mean that there could never be any chance of any mercy for any defendant.

We could reasonably assume that St Francis would approve of Inspector Bucket's act of mercy, but he might also approve of it for reasons not immediately obvious. To bring out this point, let's indulge in our own bit of fictional fiction.

One of the characters in *Dickensian*, Honoria Barbary, ends up marrying the baronet Sir Lester Deadlock in personally tragic circumstances and to save her family from financial ruin. In *Bleak House* Lady Deadlock herself is apparently a suspect in a murder case. Now she isn't guilty of this crime but just imagine what might have happened if she too had killed an assailant in self-defence. It would have been unlikely that she would have needed anyone to show her mercy because her lawyers would have argued a plea of self-defence to the police and might well have succeeded in keeping the matter out of court.

This is where St Francis would be especially interested because of his love of the poor who abounded in his social setting. The main reasons why Emily Cratchit would have been unable to defend herself before the law were her lack of financial means to do so and the prevailing social attitudes towards the impoverished classes.

The early Franciscans were known as mendicants which is simply a technical expression for religious orders who supported themselves by begging. We might think that this was just some medieval quirk that everyone else put up with. Quite the contrary. The Franciscans were a source of puzzlement and annoyance because of the way in which they embraced poverty as a positive expression of their following of Christ. The older religious orders such as the Benedictines took personal vows of poverty but organised ways of receiving a communal income. By contrast we might say that the early Franciscans organised ways of *not* receiving a communal income.

And so when Francis, having been dragged by his father before the bishop, then stripped off all his clothes, he wasn't just defying his father, he was defying an economic system based on cloth production which underpinned a social system that valued people only by their wealth and their appearance.

St Francis and Stories *or* What's History Got to do with It?

A character in one of Jane Austen's novels remarks about history that "*I think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.*"¹

Now the various stories about St Francis couldn't fairly be described as dull but they certainly do contain a great deal of invention. In this they are no different from the written lives of most medieval saints, but if they aren't strictly speaking true, what are we to make of them. Actually, nothing too much different from our own experience. In most places there will be stories about Vicar X or Father Y who were held in great regard by their parishioners. Indeed some of the stories may have been told by these worthy priests themselves. And in the telling, these stories are added to, slightly rewritten and often somewhat over embellished. But none of this is done from malevolence. Rather it is done to bring out how the life of these people magnified the God they served.

But what is it that connects us with people such as St Francis from a dim, distant and admittedly often dull past. Here is a good place to begin:

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ.....".

Or as St Francis said: "*I have done what is mine. May Christ teach you to do what is yours.*" (His last words.)

Concluding Prayer

Lord God,
you made your Church rich
through the poverty of blessed Francis:
help us, like him, not to trust in earthly things but to seek your heavenly gifts;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ Catherine Morland, *Northanger Abbey* Ch 14