

Celebrate the vulnerable and defend the poor

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St Francis' Sunday

Back in the '80s in Melbourne, Vicky and I were involved in something called a Discipleship School. It was a full-time, live-in programme where young adults gave a year of their lives to being formed as disciples of Jesus. Life was pretty frugal at Discipleship School. No-one was able to give time to earning money; no-one had much of it. The disciples paid what they could – supplemented by whatever their family, friends or supporters might give them. And the parish subsidised the school by paying the rent on the building as well as fuel and water costs.

If life was frugal, it was also very intense. If you've ever been on a church youth camp, you'll remember coming home both exhausted by the intensity of close community life, and filled with the exultation of deep worship. You'll also remember red-rimmed eyes from the endless, profound conversations that lasted late into the night. Imagine doing that for a whole year.

Discipleship School meant daily Bible classes and worship together. Everyone did lots of work alongside local poor and under-privileged people; everyone taught Religious Education at local schools; everyone was on the team with whatever project or outreach the parish undertook. But the most challenging part was living together under one roof as an intentional Christian community. It's in close, family community that the great challenges of living justly, truthfully, humbly and compassionately are right in your face every day. Discipleship School was tough and wonderful for

everyone involved, and it shaped a number of unique Christians.

I think it's the closest my life has come to living the sort of life St Francis saw Jesus live, and which Francis therefore chose for himself and for his order of Friars. It's a life of intense community, a life of costly commitment and obedience, and a life of extraordinary privilege – set free to care for the poor and the sick; to bring the lost back into the presence of Jesus. It's also a very controversial life: it was back in Francis' day; it was in the 1980's, and it's still controversial now.

Here's a part of the Rule of St Francis for his Friars.

Chapter VI

The Friars should appropriate neither house, nor place, nor anything for themselves; and they should go confidently after alms [not money or coins], serving God in poverty and humility, as pilgrims and strangers in this world. Nor should they feel ashamed, for God made himself poor in this world for us. ... Let this be your portion. It leads into the land of the living, ...

The St Francis we meet this morning seems to have a very different emphasis from the one we'll meet this afternoon at the blessing of the animals. But the kind, gentle, compassionate Francis we meet this afternoon is the very same Francis who, this morning, is so strong on poverty, humility and proclamation.

His liberty from worry about material things set Francis free to join consciously in the community of all life that depends for everything on the providence of God. Can you remember a power outage, a storm, a fire or anything else that's thrown your independence out the window and made you and your neighbourhood work with each other in an unusual way? You can get quite nostalgic for such times.

Francis, in his poverty, found himself a citizen of creation. His choice for poverty was to live simply as his Lord Jesus had instructed him in the Gospel. Absolutely central for Francis was Jesus sending his disciples out on the missionary road.

Lk 10.3 (or its equivalent in Mt 10.7-16) Go on your way. ... ⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" ... ⁷ Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid.

These are words Francis heard as instructions personally addressed to him: that Jesus called Francis to live the life which he had modelled; a life of pilgrimage as a pauper and a preacher; a life of humility; a life which would mean he was always truly dependent on providence. And that's what Francis would call for in his Friars. It was counter-cultural in Jesus' time, it was in Francis' time, and it is in ours.

The Franciscan movement's embrace of poverty posed a stark challenge to the monopoly on power which the Western medieval church exercised through its accumulation of wealth. We hear the name Francis and think of a harmless Friar preaching to the birds. But mention of Francis in his own era was just as likely to make people think of a troublemaker, a disrupter, and even a heretic. Franciscanism was hated for its nettlesome critiques of the Church's abuses of power.

St. Francis, like Jesus, exemplified Christian love. And Christian love isn't *niceness*. It's a passionate and courageous witness *on behalf of* all God's creation and *against* anything that sets itself against the work of God's kingdom. So like Jesus, Francis exhibited love by celebrating the vulnerable and defending the poor.

St Francis' Day challenges us to show love by celebrating the

vulnerable and defending the poor; to choose a modest lifestyle which won't alienate us from the living creation; to *take hold of life that really is life*. We are called to imitate Jesus, *who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ' but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...*^{Phil 2.6-7}

What might a discipleship school look like for us, here? If we were to encourage each other to live the radical life that Jesus and Francis modelled for us, how might we do it? We're still on the road to developing a Mission Action Plan.

We celebrate Francis today as one of the great exemplars of the courage it takes to bear the cost of true mission and genuinely follow Jesus. Francis formed an order to serve the world's poor and the vulnerable; that was his Christlike MAP. We know the blessings his choice brought people. As we end our Season of Creation, it's clear that a choice to work to protect and remediate Earth's abused ecosystems is the most effective way to care for the world's poor and vulnerable. We also know that as Francis experienced, this choice will meet vehement, selfish resistance. Let's choose true connection with Earth, mutual reliance, lifelong family, and a life lived with Christ in tough, loving ministry to the Earth God has called us to serve. Amen