

Dear Friend

Today is the day when we celebrate the life of St Francis of Assisi. He may be one of the best-known saints to us all but I still feel you might like to read his biography from the Lectionary. Here it is:

The son of Pietro Bernardone, a wealthy cloth merchant, Francis worked with his father until he was 20. He was well known in Assisi for his love of parties and celebrations. In 1202, as a result of a border dispute between Assisi and Perugia, Francis was taken prisoner and held for a year. On his release he returned to Assisi and continued his energetic way of life. However, after a long period of illness and a further taste of army life, Francis began to grow weary of his lifestyle. He made a pilgrimage to Rome, and was greatly affected by the beggars that he met in the city.

When he returned to Assisi Francis resigned from his father's business and left his old friends behind. He stole a bag of cloth from his father and sold it, using the proceeds to repair church buildings. He was never reconciled with his father. While he was working on the Church of Saint Damiano one morning, he heard a reading from Matthew chapter 10, in which Jesus asks his disciples to leave all behind them. Francis understood these words to be directly spoken to him.

People soon began to join the man who by now had a reputation for simple living and charity rather than for extreme behaviour and partying. He formed a group of followers, who called themselves the 'Friars Minor' and they quickly developed into a religious order.

The order spread, and Francis travelled. He attempted to reach Africa, but illness forced him back to Italy. He journeyed with the Crusaders, but preached a spiritual crusade rather than a physical war. He returned to Italy, and divided his rapidly growing order into manageable districts. He appointed other people to be in charge and wrote a 'Rule of Life'. Francis resisted seeking full approval for his order from the Papacy until 1223. By the time of his death there was a men's order, a women's order (instituted by Clare) and a lay order. He received the gift of stigmata in 1224, and died in 1226.

Francis is known as a gentle and generous man who radically altered his life in response to God. Fully devoted to God, and fully prepared to give everything for others, his life of humility and action have led to his being remembered as one of the most influential men of medieval times.

You will also know that the current Pope chose the name Francis so as to show his own faith and hope for his ministry. We will be celebrating Harvest Festival next Sunday and the reading will be Matthew 6:25-34 where Jesus tells his disciples: "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear". This is very similar to his message from Chapter 10 where Jesus is sending out his 12 disciples to preach and heal for the first time, taking very little with them. He tells them not to worry about material things. This is the foundation of St Francis' message to us – the most important things in life are not things at all!

So let us pray the Collect for today:

O God, you ever delight to reveal yourself
to the childlike and lowly of heart:
grant that, following the example of the blessed Francis,
we may count the wisdom of this world as foolishness
and know only Jesus Christ and him crucified,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen