

St Francis of Assisi

8th October 2023

Ballarat Cathedral

Most High and glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of our hearts and give us true faith, certain hope, and perfect love, that we may carry out your holy and true commands. **Amen.**

The prayer I just prayed is attributed to St Francis, whose day, of course, we are celebrating today. In the Anglican communion we have a number of Saints' Days; the Roman Catholic church has many more, and some denominations have none. In the church I grew up in, there was no such thing as a named saint. The reasoning was, that in the Bible all believers are referred to as saints. For example, Paul greets the Ephesians:

To the saints at Ephesus, who are the faithful in Christ Jesus.

Like the Ephesian church, we here are a congregation of saints, all with a small 'S'. It has been thus throughout the history of the church in every gathering of the faithful. But a very select few, among them St Francis, have been chosen to be given a capital 'S'. How did this come about, and why?

Quite early in our history, church leaders decided there was great value in recognising individual believers whose lives had been

wonderful examples of faith in action. The intention was that all Christians everywhere would acknowledge these remarkable people and celebrate the way in which their lives showed how, through God's grace, we who follow Jesus can achieve remarkable deeds of love and self-giving.

So the tradition began of recognising Saints' Days; it continues unbroken. No doubt you remember that, less than 30 years ago, Melbourne-born Mary McKillop became a capital 'S' saint within the Roman Catholic church, and was allocated her own day. St Mary of the Cross is remembered on 8th August.

Saints' Days are described in many church publications as days on which we **venerate**—or remember, respect, and celebrate—extraordinary men and women of faith. So why is St Francis singled out, and why bless pets on his day?

There is no time this morning to retell his richly fascinating life-story and remarkable achievements. But let me revisit two simple aspects, which have been portrayed by various artists through the centuries. These two pictures were the first things I even learned about Francis, and they may well come to your mind when his name is mentioned.

- a man in a forest preaching to a flock of all kinds of birds;
- a man dressed like a mediaeval beggar, in a rough brown rough cloak, with a rope girdle.

What do they mean, and why should we venerate the odd character in these two pictures? Was Francis some kind of nutter who imagined the birds could understand him? Was he a layabout who

didn't want to work for a living? Not at all. What underlay these images were two profound insights into the Christian faith which he treasured.

There is an aspect of Saints' Days that is often overlooked. Yes, they are days on which to **venerate** particular men and women of faith, but these days were introduced also to encourage us all to seek to **emulate** them. In other words, to strive to follow the saint's example of a specific saint, so that our lives will in some way replicate how they lived.

Back to Francis: what was he doing, preaching to birds? The key is in how he addressed them. He called them 'brother' and 'sister': members of his family. What a profound insight! When I think of Sister Rosella and Brother Kookaburra I am reminded that, like them, I am a tiny part of God's amazing creation. The blessing of pets we have just experienced tells us a similar story. We are related: they are his children, just as I am.

In our time, science is constantly reminding us how unbelievably complex the natural world is, and how deeply everything in it is connected to, and dependent on, everything else. What a visionary Francis was! Eight centuries ago he grasped, not the science, but the profound spiritual truth of creation. And he preached to that creation, not to teach Sister Wren and Brother Fox, but to remind himself that the very core of his being came from his relationship to God through creation. On St Francis' Day, we can strive to emulate him in this way.

You may not want to talk to birds and plants and animals—at

least not when anyone else is around. But if, every time you look at them, you remind yourself they are Sister Echidna and Brother Kangaroo, Brother Gum-tree and Sister Wattle, you will experience something of Francis' wonder, and know a profound sense of intimacy with God and his creation that will stay with you forever.

And the other picture—the beggar clad in brown sackcloth—in what sense can we emulate Francis in this? St Francis insisted that all those who wanted to follow his way must become what are known as *mendicant friars*—or, more simply, begging brothers. They must have no possessions of their own; they must not buy and store up food for the next week's meals.

The powerful message was that nothing in this world is our personal possession. Everything we have is given to us by God, and is always to be shared with others. Each of us is utterly dependent upon God, who gives us all we need by moving in the hearts of our fellow humans.

May St Francis inspire us with the same conviction. Very few of us are called to live in monasteries or wear rough cloth habits; to spend our days begging. But we are called to acknowledge that we owe everything in our lives to the Creator, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

On this special day we small 'S' saints here in the cathedral venerate capital 'S' Francis. As we go out and into the week ahead, may we also seek to emulate him, to follow his example faithfully, by reminding ourselves of these two fundamental truths:

- Each of us is God's creation, profoundly related to every other

part of the family of his universe;

- Everything we have is a gift from God, often granted through other people.

May we all become small 'F' Franciscans.