

Yesterday was the feast day of St Francis of Assisi.

Back in the early 1980's I was vicar on the Coromandel Peninsula where the little church in Tairua was named after St Francis. One of the parishioners painted a full mural along the wall behind the altar depicting St Francis walking along the beach at Tairua with children and animals playing around him. This is how we like to imagine Francis—peacefully engaged with nature without a care in the world.

This is not quite how it was for him—Francis had his share of adversity and pain. This is very much a part of being human.

There was an anniversary of some sort—either of his birth or his death—I cannot remember quite which. The parish held a series of events through that year celebrating the life and legends that surround this quite remarkable man.

I did a lot of background reading and most of my personal reflections and prayers cantered around the saint. I ended up having a love affair with him which frankly rivalled my love affair with Jesus—and it was a love affair. I became quite concerned that I should love anyone more than Jesus!

Francis was the son of a wealthy merchant. In his younger days he was a bit of a rascal and enjoyed partying and playing pranks around the town. However even then he was aware of the poor around him.

One story tells how a beggar approached him for alms whilst he was engaged in a business deal selling fabric on behalf of his father. When he had concluded his deal he ran after the beggar and emptied his purse giving all the money he had made from the business exchange. His friends chided and mocked him for this act of charity and his father was furious that he should have squandered money from the family business.

Two further events had a profound effect on the life of Francis. The first was when he was taken captive as a prisoner of war in a military expedition in 1203—he returned to Assisi broken by this experience—and the second was a serious illness that almost cost him his life the following year.

He went off on a further expedition in 1205 but a strange vision caused him to return to Assisi and he began nursing lepers who had been banished to the outskirts of the city.

His father called the bishop in to try and convince his son to return to 'sanity', and that very famous incident occurred where Francis renounces his worldly ways, strips off his clothes in front of his father and the bishop and walks away naked. From then on all he ever wore was a rough robe and sandals – the habit of present day Franciscan brothers.

There are many, many legends surrounding St Francis. One that stays potently in my mind was when Francis first went to the leper colony. He was in fact revolted and repulsed at the sight of lepers and there was one particularly badly scarred person sitting on the side of the road. He knew that he had to go over and embrace this man, but the thought of doing so nauseated him.

Francis steeled himself, strode over and wrapped his arms around the man. As he let go he looked into the man's eyes and saw the face of Christ himself.

That is a wonderful parable of facing and dealing with our own fears...

From the Coromandel I later went on to establish a Christian community that based its own Rule of Life on the precepts and example of Francis – the Peacemakers community.

Although most of the stories surrounding Francis are more legend than fact, Saint Francis enshrines the idea that we can live in communities that embody the ideals of peace, acceptance, and equity in the sharing of resources. The wonderful prayer attributed to him spells how this might be achieved:

*God, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;*

*to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

An ideal of peace, except once and equity, but just a casual look through the newspapers shows how far we have to go. The current worldwide financial crisis has been caused by greedy people who, rather than sharing resources equitably, want to gain as much as they can for themselves at the expense of others. I find it obscene that people can earn multiple millions of dollars a year trading money whilst others in the same city are forced to beg in the streets – and this is a fact in I think all American cities.

And even here in New Zealand the disparity between the haves and have not's is growing wider by the day. Heads of our electricity companies are on million dollar packages whilst many of their customers are barely able to put food on the table for their families.

The fees situations are reminiscent of Paris in the years before the French Revolution... (off with their heads, that's what I say!).

And Violence is increasing unbelievably – how many knifing incidents has there been over the past weeks? No one it seems is safe...

And sadly many who would call themselves Christian espouse violence in its not so subtle forms.

I have mentioned before about the so called 'Anti smacking law'. There was a wonderful letter to the editor in Tuesdays Herald. I would like to read some sections of that letter to you. It

"How can something that does not exist to be unpopular? Where in the law is the Anti-smacking Act, because I cannot find it.

Sue Bradford's legislation repealed section 59 of the crimes act so that abusive parents brought before the courts could not hide behind the use of "reasonable force". This was not simply smacking but hitting children with wood, pipes and anything else that angry, out-of-control parents could think of.

This bold move, in a country that continues to abuse and kill its children every week, created unprecedented hysteria. Section 59 was never repealed to ban abuse, as such. How could it? Nor was it repealed to make smacking an offence.

Now a referendum, but for what purpose? There is no anti-smacking law, so it must be to reinstate section 59. This whole thing is a huge lesson in mass hysteria ... driven by vested interest groups in order to continue abusing children in these very dark ages of 21st century.

As a mother of three and grandmother of two, I stand in awe at how mindless this all is”

And those ‘vested interest groups’ include people such as the right-wing Christian ‘Focus on Families’ or that dreadful columnist Garth George.

Hitting anybody, let alone children, is wrong - full stop.

And the promotion of violence is subtly enshrined in legislation in other ways too.

‘Gay-bashing’ happens more frequently than you might like to think. I was talking to someone just last weekend who was sitting in a restaurant with his partner when another customer walked over, said ‘I hate gays’ and punched him in the face. His glasses were broken and he got a black eye.

The police were called but they were more interested in the restaurant’s liquor licence than the assault!

Did you know that it is still a defence for an assailant to claim that they were ‘propositioned’ in incidents like this and in most cases where this defence is presented, it is accepted by the courts.

Make me an instrument of your peace - we have a long way to go.

St Frances challenged the status quo of his day in a pretty radical way. Some might say he was unsuccessful – things are really much the same today as they were in the 1200’s.

But for me Frances has provided inspiration that we can live in harmony with each other and with our environment; that we can find peace within ourselves

and with our fellow human-beings; that we can love the unloveable and embrace the leper in whatever form that leper may take; that we can challenge the powers that be, ripping off our clothes in symbolic gestures at our disgust with the status quo...

We must work for peace and for justice – this is our calling as partners with Jesus.

I came across this little piece called ‘Beatitudes of Blessed Unrest’:

Blessed are the hopeful: they hold the promise of tomorrow.

Blessed are the courageous: they embrace the challenge of today.

Blessed are the forgiving: they are free of the burden of the past.

Blessed are the people of prolonged engagement: they will create a better world for the children.

Blessed are the disappointed: they will rise and anticipate a better day.

Blessed are the self forgetful:

Blessed are the liberators: they will set the captives free.

Blessed are the engaged mystics: they will ignite fire on the earth and unite the stars with the streets.

May we, like St Frances and like Jesus Christ, ignite fire on the earth and unite the stars with the streets.