

**Sermon preached at Holy Trinity Choral Evensong
on Sunday 7 July 2019**

Genesis 29 v.1-20

Mark 6 v.7-29

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

‘Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace!’ Words I imagine prayed by many of us as we struggle with the meaning and purpose of our lives. Words prayed by St Francis of Assisi. The words of a man whose life was full of contradiction, full of strange turnings, full of conflicts. A man who was to espouse poverty, he was born the son of a rich cloth merchant in twelfth century Assisi, and led the life of a privileged and spoilt young man about town, an Italian Prince Harry before the army and Meghan and the baby. A man who was to preach peace, Francis joined the army when Assisi waged war on nearby Perugia. Some years later, on his way to join the papal forces, he was struck by a voice in a dream, telling him to ‘follow the master, not the man’. He sensed this was a call from Christ, turned back to Assisi, and began to care for the poor and the sick, even the most marginalised of the poor and the sick, the lepers.

Two years later, as he was at prayer in a church outside Assisi, Francis was again inspired by a voice, this time telling him to ‘repair the church, which as you can see is in ruins.’ Francis interpreted this literally and decided to act. He decided to sell some of his father’s cloth to finance the restoration of that little church outside Assisi.

His father had had enough of this delinquency, and took Francis to the bishop’s court, where he was ordered to pay back the money. He obeyed, and with a dramatic gesture renounced his inheritance and handed over his fine clothes as well. An act both personal and revolutionary.

He spent the next two years as a hermit, committed in holy vows to complete poverty and dedication to God. One day, at mass, he was listening to the gospel reading about Jesus sending out the disciples without money or two tunics, which we have just heard, and realised that this was to be quite literally, his vocation. Keeping a rough shepherd’s tunic, he began preaching repentance in the streets of Assisi.

What Francis did with the rest of his life was to live and promote a spirituality rooted totally in the gospels. His message and his life were as radical as the gospels.

Francis lived a life that put him at odds with his father, at odds with society, and often at odds with the Church.

So, when we pray 'Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace' how radical is our commitment to live in imitation of Christ? We live in a society, in a part of the world, where there is a good measure of justice and security, a balance between the care of the weak and the freedom for the individual to gather riches. As a society we have devised a compromise. In many ways a compromise that is humane, not radical, but also not uncaring. But how do we as a society ensure that our care for the poor and hungry is sustained and increased? How do we extend the boundaries of our care beyond our national frontiers to embrace those parts of the world in greatest need, where hunger and sickness are the measure of everyday life? How do we challenge the compromise? Our voices are often at odds with the most powerful in society. Compassion, justice, mercy are not attributes exclusive to Christianity, but they are emphatically central to living a life in imitation of Christ.

And at the heart of that gospel is God's love for all his children, no matter how slight a value the world might place upon us as individuals, rich or poor, healthy or sick, and no matter how inconvenient, pathetic, embarrassing, many hungry or sick people are in the eyes of the world.

But to know that at a purely cerebral level is not enough. As disciples of Christ, whether we are mature adults or whether we are this summer entering the next stage of growing up, we cannot leave His work solely to our leaders.

If we are truly to be an instrument of God's peace, it will be our greatest challenge, our duty, our joy, to open our hearts and minds to the love of God, and to understand what is Christ's will for us, and to act upon it, no matter how strangely and uncomfortably that will be received by the world's judgement. It is our new life in Christ. It is our priority. The responsibility to live in imitation of Christ is truly ours. Amen.