A Sermon for the Feast of St Francis

The passage from the Book of the Prophet Micah asks what we need to do in order to approach God in the right way. It ponders whether we need to make offerings and sacrifices, and whether these will please God. In the context of the era in which it was written, offerings and sacrifices were a commonly used method to give thanks to God, and to honour God for the blessings we have received. There is a real sense that we need to prove our devotion, and to placate God in order to earn blessings from God, or to avoid being punished. But Micah says that these aren't the way.

Having rejected placating God through offerings, the passage ends with the famous direction to "do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God". It reminds us of three important aspects of the Christian faith. We are tasked with being people who advocate for justice. We are called to be peacemakers and peacekeepers, and to treat people with compassion.

We are also called to "love kindness", being people whose mercy and empathy allow them to see the humanity of all people, and to engage with them with grace and sympathy. We are to be kind, which sounds like a simple task, but takes effort and makes a world of difference.

Finally, we are called to walk humbly with God. We are called to keep journeying in faith, being mindful that our relationship with God is one which is ongoing, and is one where there is always more to learn and experience. Walking humbly with God means that we are honest about who we are, what we have done in the past, and are willing to learn and to change if necessary. This is not about berating ourselves for any sense of having made mistakes or fallen short, but embracing God's love and mercy, and knowing that we can change for the better, if we have the commitment and intention to do so.

Our mindset is also the focus on the Gospel passage. Today's text is one which runs the risk of being misinterpreted, and in my opinion, requires careful consideration for us to take the most from it. But there is something very valuable that we may learn, and put into practice.

Jesus is reassuring the disciples. This is typical in his discussions and conversations with them. With this particular passage, you can easily imagine that one of them has asked Jesus about how they are to manage financially. Perhaps the questions were asked: Where is the money to come from? How will we pay for what we need each day?

Jesus reminds them that "life is more than food and the body more than clothing", which is true. We are not to be dedicated in the pursuits and fascinations of the world. We are called to try and rise above them, difficult though that may be.

I'm sure you can think of many things that you would really like to have, but do not in fact need. Possessing them would not, in fact, make you happier in the long-term or better as a person; it would just be an object that you own. Macklemore once wrote in a song lyric this great truth: "Things are just things, they don't make you who you are."

Jesus is reminding the disciples of this truth, but this cannot negate the fact that we need to eat, and clothing to wear. We need things to survive and thrive. We do indeed need to know how we will support ourselves and those we love and care for and are responsible for. And the effort to do so is sometimes considerable.

So let's look at what Jesus is really saying: Try not to be too anxious about life. Know what is truly important and focus on those things. Focus on the things within your control, and leave the rest alone, and trust in God's goodness. That, as usual, is sound advice.

He then offers a radical demonstration of what it looks like to trust in God. "Sell your possessions and give alms". He calls his disciples to look to the needs of others, rather than their own needs. And he reminds them that such a mindset is one which is connected to God, and which truly understands what is precious and valuable in this life.

Today's feast day connects us to someone who was incredibly generous to those in need, and whose life was shaped around serving others, rejecting the privilege and status into which they were born and raised. Today we mark the Feast of St Francis of Assisi. Frequently associated with animals and the environment, he was also dedicated to serving the poor and disadvantaged, and founded the Franciscan Order that still serves and cares for people today.

In St Francis, we have an excellent example of a faithful Christian, who knew what was at the heart of the Christian faith – love, compassion and authenticity.

Francis demonstrated his authenticity in the way he let his actions declare themselves. In Chapter 12 of the Rule of St Francis, it states that "all the Friars … should preach by their deeds." It is a succinct reminder that our deeds should reflect what we believe, and speak loudly for us. Let us also preach by our deeds, and not just our words.

To link the Gospel passage that we heard today to St Francis, he was one who truly embraced living a simple life, making a vow of personal poverty, in order to provide for those in need. He turned his back on personal wealth in order to serve the disadvantaged. His example is one of grace, strength and determination. May we take that example into our own lives, to remind us that we are merely the stewards of the things we possess, that we are called to use them wisely and well, that they do not define us, but that our actions and words do.

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