

King's College London Chapel



A sermon celebrating St Francis

By the Revd Dr Ellen Clark-King, Dean of King's College London

in the College Chapel on the Strand,

on Wednesday 4th October 2023

Today we celebrate St Francis, the founder of the Franciscans and the 12th century Disney Princess of saints. Think Sleeping Beauty singing to the birds as they perch on her fingers, or think Cinderella befriending the mice in the kitchen, and you have most people's popular idea of St Francis. A friendly, picturesque saint, surrounded by happily tweeting birds and friendly woodland animals.

This isn't a bad way to see him, just incomplete. Today's readings capture perfectly the two sides of St Francis's character – the gentle saint who finds refreshment and rest in God's beautiful creation, and the fierce saint who embraced the leper and became one with the poor. In this first sermon of the academic year, I want to call us to live out both parts of his character.

Let's begin with the gentle invitation of the gospel, for all who are weary to come to Jesus and find rest. You may be feeling weary already after the excitement of welcome week as you settle into the reality of your life at King's this year. There is certainly plenty of weariness in the wider world. Weary with outrage over endemic inequality. Weary of the nastiness of much social media. The world often feels weary right now.

And when we are weary, the gentle, compelling voice of Jesus calls us to rest. This is the first part of Christ's calling that I entrust to you this year. Love yourself as Jesus loves you. Value yourself as God values you – your infinite worth lying in who you are not in what you do. Find your resting place, the space where you can give up adulting for a while and know yourself held in an embrace of love that enfolds the whole world. Give yourself a break. Don't try and be everything to everyone (don't try and make everyone happy – you are not pizza!) embrace your finitude, your limitedness, and let God be God.

Do what St Francis did. Strip off the expectations of others that stop you being yourself. Walk away from a life where worth depends solely on performance and achievement. Find delight in the companionship of all God's creation – the fierce and wild storms and rushing waters, the quiet and whimsical songbirds and soft pets. And the human parts too. St Francis didn't only commune with animals, he also companioned human beings – us who are fierce, wild, whimsical, soft creatures, who too often forget our animal, bodily needs.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

And yet, and also - from Jeremiah: *“He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord.”* Rest is not the whole story, delight in creation is not the whole story. The gentle “Disney princess” St Francis communing with the twittering birds is not the whole story of the saint we celebrate today.

St Francis was very aware of those in his own day whose burdens were heavier than his own, those who were not able to find the rest they were promised. St Francis reminds us that, as well as receiving God's solace and rest, we are also called to give it to others. Like the saint we are called to be as Christ to our world. We are to give rest to those our world has excessively wearied. To those who bear the burdens of our history, of colonialism, of slavery, of racism and sexism. We must help all people to be un-burdened, to find rest for their souls.

This is the second part of God's calling that I call us to live out. To be the ones who offer the possibility of rest and respite to others, who know God through knowing, and embracing, the cause of the poor and the needy.

Jeremiah's God says: "*Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice;*". And woe to us when we do the same! We may not be called to embrace poverty as Francis did, but we are unequivocally, inescapably and repeatedly called to embrace the poor. And poor here has a wide meaning, as wide as the ways our world oppresses those without power. The poor are obviously those who are unhoused here on our streets, as well as those families, and students, whose ability to pay for both rent and food is fragile. But they are also those robbed of their birthright to be seen and treated as full human beings, equal to any and every other person – that includes black, indigenous and people of colour. That includes LGBTQ people. That includes women.

May we help those around us this year to know what true Christianity is. Not to wave a Bible or try to control people's sexual behaviour. Not to denounce those who understand God differently. Not to uphold family values and yearn for a return to the 1950s. But this, this – to judge the cause of the poor and the needy. Then it will be well. Then we will truly know God. This is what it means to be part of our college chapel – to know God through knowing the oppressed. To love God through loving the oppressed. To reimagine church, and to tell the Christian story, so that all may receive God's loving gift of rest.

This year may you all know yourselves beloved of God, worthy of rest, and held close in the loving arms of the divine. May you all know yourselves called to bring God's justice to bear in this university, this city and beyond. May this be a year that the spirit of St Francis finds new life here at King's.

Amen.