

Isaiah 11:2-3, 6-9, Psalm 121, Galatians 6:14-18, Luke 18:18-30

Francis and the Dream of Chivalry

‘Whoso pulleth out this sword from this stone and anvil is the true-born King of all Britain.’

I am very grateful to have been invited back to Grace Cathedral this morning just a day after a celebration here of the 100th Anniversary of Franciscan friars in the Episcopal Church. But why, on this St Francis Sunday, am I opening, not with the scripture, or a quotation from Saint Francis, or from our own founder Father Joseph, but with a snippet of British folklore?

I was probably about 10 or 11 years old when TH White’s story of Britain’s mythical *Once and Future King* became my favorite childhood book. That my middle name, Arthur, was shared by its hero added to the magic. About the same time, a slim volume of prayers passed on to me by my lay preacher father, introduced me to the magnetic attraction of Saint Francis of Assisi. This was also, roughly, the close of an era in my life when my otherwise positive school report cards tended to lament a propensity for daydreaming.

There is a lot more to Francis than birdbaths, animal stories and the words of a beautiful Peace Prayer which, though true to his spirit, he certainly didn’t write. It is a shame that some of the things he actually *did* say or write are not better known. But one remarkable discovery for me as I began to learn more of the lesser-known Francis, was that he and I shared a common subject matter for our childhood dreaming! We both loved the world of true-born kings, knights, minstrels, heralds and heroic quests. The writings of Francis bear direct witness at certain points to the inspiration he found in the legend of Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, as do his early biographers. Francis’ life reminds us that God can speak to us in our dreams and visions, both literal and metaphorical. But it reminds us too of the power of the Gospel to transform and rework those dreams in ways that we might never imagine.

A statue of St Francis outside his basilica in Assisi can rather surprise the casual pilgrim. It does not portray him as the famous, charismatic friar. Nor is this the fashionably well-dressed youth who was the heart and soul of the parties of his age-group and social class. And this is not the young warrior who once set out proudly from Assisi with the best armor and attire that money could buy. That had happened in Italy in 1204 or 5, not of course in the England of the 1970s, and the dream of actually *becoming* a knight was for him a credible one. Francis set out to join the forces of Count Gentile of Manipullo, fighting for the noble cause of the Pope against the Emperor, and it was actually feasible that if he had acquitted himself well he might have been made a knight by the Count, right there on the field of battle. In a sign, however, of the traits that had always been present in the character of this young man, when he had found an *actual* knight, but one shabbily and shoddily equipped, Francis had given away his own armor and finery. Subsequently in two night-time dreams in the city of Spoleto, Francis had received, first, what he thought was a glorious confirmation of all that he had dreamed of ever since he learned the French ballads that told these tales of chivalry: a dream of Francis himself, feasting in a fine castle with knights that were somehow *his* knights. But the second dream challenged him to a radical reinterpretation of what that glory and call really was, a challenge to let go of all that he *thought* was his deepest desire and hope for his future. The statue depicts Francis returning to Assisi having never reached the battlefield, slumped over on his horse, lacking the finery with which he had set out, returning covered not with glory but with confusion and bewilderment, engaged in a process of radical *disillusionment*, the literal loss of an illusion that had been cheered by his family and friends as he had set out earlier.

That was just one of a series of incidents that turned Francis’ life upside down. But through them all, he began to realize that the fashionable ideal of knightly chivalry that had gripped the wealthy young men of Europe was a poor shadow of a far greater spiritual reality. According to the modern Franciscan author, Brother Mark of Whitstable, Francis ‘re-invented the ideal of chivalry through a kind of inversion’. Feudal pride was subsumed by the ideal of humility. Knightly quests were replaced by long and hazardous journeys

across Europe preaching the gospel. The sword was displaced by a message of peace and reconciliation. And the very status of knighthood itself gave way to Francis and his brothers calling themselves the Friars Minor or Lesser Brothers, identifying themselves firmly with the underclass, the *minore* of medieval Italy. Unlike the rich young man in our Gospel, who turned away from the call of Jesus with such sadness, the rich young man of Assisi found perfect joy in giving away everything to live in the freedom of the gospel.

Now part of the attraction of the legend of King Arthur, for me as for Francis, was the *fellowship* of the Round Table, the wonderful solidarity of those brothers in arms, celebrating the heroic deeds of each and all, holding one another in mutual honor and respect. But what a *limited* fraternity, not least in the restricted, gendered sense of that term! In English at least, it is very difficult to find a truly inclusive term for a concept like Fraternity or Sorority. By the end of his life Francis' vision of who, or *what* was his Sister or Brother had expanded to include... everything. Not just those close to him or sharing a faith with him. Not just human beings. Not even just animals. It is appropriate that we honor the Christ-light in animals by bringing them to Church today for a blessing, but not only because there are some cute stories about Saint Francis and the animals. For some years as a Brother I had on my wall poster that had been issued to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, portraying a kind of evolutionary family tree linking the whole variety of animal and plant life. It became the subject of contemplative reflection for me. I believe Saint Francis would have loved the theory of Evolution, once he'd got over the shock of it. All living things really are, in effect, sisters and brothers. My own scientific field was not biology – I used to teach High School Physics and Astronomy – but many who have followed Francis, especially those writing today, have explored our connection, our common origins, not only with all living things but in stars and galaxies as well as the connectedness of the tiniest particles in the quantum behavior of matter itself. Francis himself, writing in the last years of his life recognized not only living things as his sisters and brothers but also Mother Earth, Brother Sun, Sister Water, Brother Fire, even Sister Death. His great poem – the first to be written in vernacular Italian – is best known in English as the hymn *All Creatures of our God and King*. The relevance to our present world crisis needs no further exposition.

But loving Christ in the whole created order is sometimes easier than loving other people! That is why I also want to highlight one other incident in the life of Francis, one that took place a few years before the end of his life, and one that is again highly relevant to the social and political currents of our present culture.

One truly terrible consequence, in part perhaps, of the idolization of chivalry in the time of Francis, was the appalling ideology of the Christian Crusades. But these terrible events provided the context for one of the most significant quests of Francis' transformed chivalry – and one that illustrates how having your dreams challenged and reformed, is not something that happens just once, but is rather an ongoing process.

When Francis arrived in a Crusader Camp in Egypt in 1219, he did not do so, like the Cardinal Pelagius who was also there, to urge the soldiers on against the Muslim enemy. He was done with holy war! Crossing the front lines with a companion, at enormous jeopardy to both of them, his mission rather was to seek an audience with Sultan Malik Al Kamil. Now actually, I *don't* believe that when he set out Francis was motivated, 800 years ahead of our time, by some progressive vision of interfaith dialogue. But that is partly what makes what happened next so remarkable. His dreams had, indeed, already changed at least once. He no longer had a vision of military glory, fighting for the forces of God against the powers of darkness. But I *do* believe that the dream with which he set out to Damietta was not the same as the vision with which he returned. On setting out, either of two outcomes would have been OK for Francis. The best, his first intention, would have been the conversion of the Sultan and his people. The crusades would surely end when everyone had become Christian! The second, a very real possibility, and one fulfilled in some of his brothers in Morocco the following year, would have been the spiritual glory of a martyr's death. But the Sultan was not converted. And Francis was not martyred. From the perspective of those dreams, the quest was a failure.

The historically attested story of the Sultan and the Saint was told in a 2016 film, screened last year on PBS and produced by the *Unity Productions Foundation*, a team of American Muslim scholars with those from other faith backgrounds. It describes how the Sultan allowed Francis to preach freely, and how the two spent some days together. One of those who speak in the film is Franciscan friar and historian Michael

Cusato, who comments, 'I believe... watching Muslims pray, men and women, five times daily... really struck Francis unexpectedly. I believe it profoundly moved him.' Sister Kathleen Warren adds, 'The respect they had for each other spoke volumes to Francis that this, indeed, was not an enemy, this was not a beast, but this was truly a *brother*.'

The siege, tragically, and to the disgust of Francis, continued after the meeting between the two men, with the Crusaders wiping out 80,000 people in Damietta, and the Sultan forced to retreat. The balance of power was dramatically reversed later when the Crusaders found themselves bogged down in flood waters and mud, surrounded and starving. The Sultan could have let them die, or sent his soldiers in for an easy kill, but instead he sent his enemies food, and feed for their animals. Many lives were saved and both sides returned home. What we know as the love and mercy of God revealed in Christ was not confined to just one of the men in this encounter.

I mentioned earlier that there are prayers and devotions written by Francis which are not well known. I thought it beautiful when I realized that some of those prayers, and some of the particular devotions practiced by Franciscans and later by other Western Christians, show the clear possibility that they were influenced and inspired by the devotions and practices of Muslims observed by Francis in Egypt.

At a time when so many leaders in our public life seek to make political capital by stirring up our fears of those who may be different to ourselves, we need that discovery of the primary unity of all people as our sisters and brothers. And all of us, throughout our lives, need to remain open to the challenge and invitation to have our dearest dreams radically transformed, and *retransformed*, as we learn to encounter ever more deeply the God of love revealed by Christ in unexpected people and unexpected places.