

C 27th Sunday, October 5-6, 2013

♪ All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing: *Alleluia! Alleluia!*
Oh burning sun with golden beam and silver moon with softer gleam:
O praise ye! O praise ye! Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! ♪

October 4th was the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. That hymn is part of the vision of the Gospel St Francis preached and lived and sang in the 13th century. It was called "*Cantico delle Creature*," The Canticle of Creatures - or sometimes the Canticle of Brother Sun.

I thought of it when I read the beautiful words in the 1st reading from the prophet Habakkuk, "*The vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment and will not disappoint.*" We need to hear those words in our own day - when so many seem to have lost their vision and the clear call to care for the poor is so easily overlooked by the rich and powerful.

What is the vision expressed in the hymn we just heard and sang?

Francis wrote: "*Laudato sie, mi' Signore, cum tucte le tue creature.*" All praise be yours, my Lord, with all your creatures. Francis goes on to invite all men & women to praise God for and through all of creation, even as birds & flowers praise God just by being what they are.

The vision of this great canticle has been the framework of my response to the Gospel for most of my adult life. Sr. Anna and I have even composed a dramatic presentation based on it. It is a vision of caring *about* all creatures & caring *for* all of creation, a vision reflected in Pope Benedict's Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. The Pope wrote these words:

"We must recognize our grave duty to hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it. *The Church has a responsibility towards creation...* she must defend ... earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.

The Gospel vision of Francis is also one of trusting faith, love and forgiveness. A vision reflected in today's 2nd reading, "The spirit God has given us is no cowardly spirit, but rather one that makes us strong, loving and wise."

And it is a vision that begins in praise, reflected in the Responsorial Psalm for today, "Come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord ... let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving."

There are many stories about how St. Francis lived this Gospel vision of relationship with all of creation. In his canticle he calls all creatures his brothers & sisters. He especially liked birds.

There is a story of how a falcon became a great friend of his and woke him every night with its song just at the time he used to rise to pray. But when Francis needed a longer rest than usual, the falcon had mercy on him and did not wake him up so early.

He also *preached* to the birds, all kinds of them. He said to them,

"My brothers and sisters, you should praise your Creator very much and always love him; he gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly and whatever else was necessary for you. God made you noble among his creatures and gave you a home in the purity of the air, though you neither sow nor reap, God cares for you."

There is a contemporary story about a bird with that reflects the vision of Francis and of the Gospel of Jesus. It is about an Eagle. In 2010 a Steppe Eagle was shot in Afghanistan. Two of our servicemen rescued him and cared for him, even sharing some of their own rations. They named the eagle "Mitch" and began looking for a home for him, since he could no longer fly. They contacted the Berkshire Bird Paradise in Petersburg, NY in Rensselaer County outside of Troy. My youngest sister, Barbara Chepaitis, had just written a book about this sanctuary, entitled *Feathers of Hope*. With Pete Dubacher, a Viet Nam vet who runs the Sanctuary, she began an incredible journey of compassion and courage on behalf of Mitch and those who cared for him. They had to deal with rigid bureaucracies in the US and Afghanistan. They worked with the USDA, Federal Fish & Wildlife, the State Department, the White House and the World Conservation Society. With the help of Senator Schumer and his staff, they were part of a miracle of faith - Brother Mitch arrived in the US in October, 2010 just before the Feast of St. Francis, and, after a time in quarantine, came to the Berkshire Bird Paradise. Sr. Anna and I got to do a blessing for him during an October snowstorm.

Their faith looks to me like the faith described in today's Gospel - "if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to a mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and planted in the sea.'" The vision that kept Mitch's caregivers going was a vision of how all creation is connected and that compassion for one of God's creatures is a blessing for all of them - human and otherwise. Caring for one of God's creatures was a significant boost to the morale of many of the young men and women who are enduring the horror of war so far from home. My sister Barbara just published a book about these events - It is called, *Saving Eagle Mitch, One Good Deed in a Wicked World*. It has been published both on kindle and in paperback.

Today's Gospel ends with the words, "When you have done all that you have been commanded, say, 'We are merely servants & deserve no credit; we have done what we were obliged to do.'"

When we have done everything we can to care for creation, to love one another and to praise and thank our God we have only acted as good servants. Our actions do not earn salvation, they are a response to the gifts of God - the gift of Creation, the gift of life itself, the gift of all the love we have experienced in this world and the great gift we celebrate in this Eucharist - the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

The vision of the Gospel in the song we began with has endured to the 21st century. The familiar setting in most Catholic and Protestant hymnals uses a tune from 1623, a translation from the late 19th century and was copyrighted in 1927. There have been many versions of the lyrics of the song, a poem which Francis composed, since then, but my favorite is one composed by a Friar in 1990 called "Sacred Creation."

♪ Sacred the land, sacred the water, sacred the sky holy and true.
Sacred all life, sacred each other, all reflect God who is good. ♪

First Reading: Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4 [the vision still has its time ... it will not disappoint]

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 95 "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts"

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14 [God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power, love and self-control]

Gospel: Luke 17:5-10 [Increase our faith]