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Reflection for Franciscan Morning Prayer
Canterbury Cathedral
Wednesday 11th September 2024

'...two very small coins dropped into the Temple treasury'

I think St Francis must have been drawn to this story of the poor women who was noticed by Jesus because he, Francis, was attracted by things that were small. The Portiuncula, the Little Portion of St Mary of the Angels that became home for him. The smallness that he knew himself: *'your little brother Francis'* he writes at the end of his Testament, *'your very little servant'* he writes in his Letter to the Entire order. And then there is the title he gives to his followers: *'everyone shall be called a lesser brother'*; brothers who were to *'beg alms as poor little ones'* and who were to *'rejoice when they live among people considered of little value'*. He was a person who delighted in littleness, in small birds of the field and small weeds in the garden. For Francis small was beautiful.

For him smallness was beautiful not simply in an aesthetic sense (although he must have had a good eye for beauty), but because it was revealed to him that smallness is the way that God makes himself known. Almighty God operates in and through smallness. Francis was overwhelmed by the humility of God in Jesus, who as St Clare puts it in her Letter to St Agnes, on *'coming into the Virgin's womb, chose to appear despised, needy and poor in the world'*; Francis' heart was bowled over by the recognition that the Lord of heaven and earth should hide himself daily within an ordinary piece of bread. To borrow the title of a Booker Prize-winning novel, for Francis, God was 'The God of Small Things'.

So, smallness is intrinsic to our Franciscan vocation. I hesitate to say it's a Franciscan virtue; more an aspiration than a virtue because I'm conscious of how often we fall short of it, both individually and corporately. It's a Franciscan charism which, when it is present within and among us, is both beautiful and effective.

One of the things that is remarkable about the arrival 800 years ago of the first brothers of St Francis is how small, precarious, risky was their mission. It seems that they set out across the channel with no material resources, no advance publicity, little in the way of obvious organisation (Franciscans have never been very good at that), and no letters of recommendation - Francis himself forbade any seeking of privileges. This little band arriving at Dover, moving to Canterbury and then pushing on rapidly to London, Reading,

Oxford and Northampton, depended entirely on the goodwill and kind-heartedness of others. The fragility and vulnerability of their mission, mirroring the fragility and vulnerability of God in Jesus Christ, was its only resource, its sole strength.

And it was hugely, powerfully, attractive. Michael in his lecture yesterday afternoon emphasised how rapidly the order grew in England. It seems that the brothers just picked up followers on the way, a kind of snowball effect. People were drawn by the message of God's abundant mercy, compassion and vulnerability that was enfleshed, embodied by the life together of these little bands of brothers.

One of the things that Thomas of Eccleston often refers to in his 'Coming of the Franciscans' is their fraternity. Brothers sometimes huddling together to keep warm, gathering around a stove to share the warm thick dregs of beer (it sounds disgusting), caring for each other in sickness, encouraging each other in hardship. And the joy and laughter and playfulness among them. Moroseness and mission do not go well together. Br Marco, a Third Order Regular, whom I met in Assisi earlier this year, told me that when he was in charge of novices he used to make the new brothers read Eccleston's account in order that they might glimpse and hopefully share those bonds of fraternity.

And of course it's this vulnerable, fragile, joyful fraternity, this minority, this littleness, which leads us to recognise and bond with others in their vulnerability. As we gathered on the beach at Dover on Monday evening and yesterday morning to commemorate the arrival of the first brothers our thoughts and our prayers were with those who are arriving today – vulnerable, fragile, isolated; despised and feared by many. Twenty-one thousand this year – so far. As I searched for a stone with a hole in it as we were asked to, it felt as though I was looking for a person washed up on the shore, perhaps Jesus himself. A sign of the Kingdom.

For this is where the green shoots of the Kingdom – referred to in that reading from Luke - are to be found. Amongst the dross, amongst the weeds, in the small things, in the widow's mite (all of them seeds of peace), God hides himself in order to welcome us and all creation into the perfect joy of his Kingdom. To the God who gives himself abundantly through Small Things, the God whom Francis discovered and rejoiced in, be all honour and praise for ever.