

# **Agnellus of Pisa**

10<sup>th</sup> September 2009

## **8<sup>th</sup> Centenary Celebrations**

Acts 4:32-35

Matt 18:1-5

- The disciples were, like many of us, from time to time worried about who was the greatest among them.
- And we smile indulgently when we think of them squabbling about who was going to sit at Jesus' right hand in his kingdom and who at his left – who was going to take precedence.
- How could they misunderstand Jesus' message so greatly, we think to our selves complacently, as to be worried about who is most important?
- But hold on, we have no right to be so hard on the disciples.
- We Franciscans, who call ourselves the Lesser Ones and brothers and sisters to all – have a history riven with disputes about who should take precedence.
- Which is the Order Francis founded first? Is it the First Order or the Third, if the First, which branch of the First Order can claim to be the one Francis founded and which is a breakaway from the trunk? Whose habit looks most like the one Francis wore, which colour is the original one?
- Now of course I can tell you the answer to all those questions – but I expect at least half of you wouldn't believe me!
- We are a movement that has cornered the market on one-upmanship and subtle and not so subtle digs.
- The first Order even had a general chapter nearly descend into a riot when it seemed a friar from the “wrong” branch, with papal support, was going to be elected Minister General.
- So we have no right to be complacent about some of the disciples being concerned about who was the greater.
- Instead we need first of all to recognise that exactly the same temptations as bewitched those disciples, also strangle us and prevent us from following Christ as he has called us to.
- We too come to him asking “who is the greatest?”
- And today he gives us the answer that he gave the disciples.

- The greatest one is the one who humbles himself like a child.
- Not only that but we can't even enter the kingdom of heaven unless we become like children.
- Becoming great in Jesus' eyes, in the kingdom of heaven, begins with humility.
- And humility begins with being truthful about ourselves – recognising our strengths and our weaknesses, our glories and our sins.
- St. Francis put it in a wonderful phrase - “What you are before God, that you are and nothing more.”
- God has no illusions about any one of us – he isn't fooled by the shows we put on for each other.
- He knows who we are – and part of our growing up is growing to realise and admit who we are, at least to God and ourselves but also, we hope, to trusted ones who we know will love us even if we do not live up to their fantasies about us.
- Being great in the kingdom begins with humility, admitting to ourselves who we are and not trying to pretend we are someone else.
- And when we admit this to ourselves, we realise that all the good that we have comes to us as a gift.
- Our genes that give us the framework for our body and our health are a gift, immediately from our parents and more profoundly from God.
- Our values come to us too from family, teachers, friends and those we love. Gifts that we can accept or reject but which come to us from beyond ourselves.
- The insights we receive in prayer are gifts of the Holy Spirit, who whispers to us in the depths of our being.
- Our growth as a human person depends on our relationships with others – with those we meet and with God.
- Our good impulses need God's grace and help to become realities;.
- When we consider ourselves, we learn that the only thing we can lay claim to as exclusively our own is our sin.
- All else is gift.
- So in humility, since all that we have that is good comes to us from others and ultimately from God, we need to realise that poverty is our natural state.
- We are fundamentally so poor that we are dependent upon others even for who we are.

- And this is of course why Jesus tells us that we must humble ourselves like little children in order to become great in the kingdom of heaven.
- For little children realise that they are utterly dependent upon others for who they are
- Lost child will cry for their parents.
- Take away their carers and they know they are lost – but we, too often, kid ourselves with the illusion that we can become independent of God and independent of our brothers and sisters.
- We think, like the Pharisees, that we can act with justice if we follow the right rules and so deserve God's love and the reward of the kingdom of heaven.
- We think, perhaps even more so in our age, that we can buy the comforts that we need in order to feel good about ourselves, without reference to others or to the love we need from them.
- We may even think that we can win God's love and human approval by great feats of asceticism.
- But all this is illusion, because we forget that there is only one way into the kingdom of heaven – the humility of the child who knows his dependence upon God and upon others.
- It is this insight that underlies all that we seek to do and be as Franciscans.
- It was Francis' utter honesty in pursuit of this humility that made his way so attractive.
- Our poverty is the external expression of that humility – it is our profession of faith that all that is really important can be gained through human solidarity rather than through private hoarding.
- Our fraternity is the fruit of our humility – for if we recognise our own fallibility and weakness, then we cannot but be compassionate to the vulnerability of others and their needs.
- Our minority is the only attitude a truly humble one can adopt – for which one of us, realising the great goodness that God has exercised in our regard, the mercy he has shown us sinners, can look at our world from any other point of view than from below, as the least of all who has value only because of the goodness and grace of God?
- Today we continue our celebrations of the 8<sup>th</sup> centenary of Francis having these insights approved by the Church as the basis for a way of life.
- We continue them on a date and a spot that link us intimately with Francis and

his early companions.

- For today, the 10<sup>th</sup> September, is the date that Agnellus of Pisa, sent by Francis, landed with the first friars in England – and for this reasons is celebrated as his memorial.
- They began their first wooden and mud friary just across the river from here where now the wild flower meadow stands.
- Under our feet here lay the high altar of the church of that friary when it grew and was built in stone.
- This site, then, stands as a witness to the continuity of presence of Franciscans in Britain since that time.
- It is also a witness to the sadness of of our history – for the once great friary lies in ruins – consumed in the turmoil of 16<sup>th</sup> century politics.
- And we remember today the many who have struggled to maintain that presence and that witness of poor, fraternal minority in season and out of season.
- But we cannot dwell on our memories – even the historians among us must bow to the words of Francis who admonished those who seek to gain prestige from recounting the deeds of others.
- For as Francis realised the temptation to prove our greatness by reference to the deeds of our forbears is great.
- It is a temptation we must resist – for our primary task is not to rehearse the glories of the past, but instead to build God's kingdom today.
- For that there can be no greater tool than the humility of a child who knows his need of God and of each other.
- With that humility we can, in the words of our Holy Father Francis, begin again to follow the Lord and accomplish great things, rather than seeking to receive glory and honour simply by recounting them.
- They did what was theirs to do, it is now our task to listen to the Lord to discover and do what is ours.