

Preaching to Birds

4 October 2026, Feast of St Francis of Assisi.

Readings: Matthew 11:25-30 and Galatians 6:14-18.

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I am going to start today with a story, but this isn't one of my stories, this is one of the early stories of St Francis of Assisi, as told by St Bonaventure. Bonaventure who was only 5 years old when Francis passed away, but who was deeply inspired by him in later life and wrote one of his early biographies.

In Bonaventure's story, Francis is struggling with a personal dilemma. Should he continue travelling around, preaching the gospel, or should he devote himself to a life of prayerful solitude. So, he sent some of his brothers to two of his close confidants, Clare and Sylvester, asking for their advice.

Both Clare and Sylvester responded sending messengers to tell Francis that he must continue his good work proclaiming the gospel.

According to Bonaventure, Francis immediately got up and set off to continue his mission. Now I want you to imagine what you think Francis did next. Do you imagine he went to a King or a Prince? Or do you think maybe the humble Francis went to proclaim the good news in a village.

Well, according to Bonaventure, Francis came to a spot where a large flock of birds had come together. And Francis preached to the birds, calling on them to praise the God who had clothed them in feathers, given them wings to fly with and the pure air to fly in. By Bonaventure's account the birds seemed receptive to Francis' preaching and waited for him to give the sign of the cross and dismiss them before they departed.

Francis reportedly later remarked that he had been negligent in his duties because he had never preached to birds before and, according to Thomas of Celano, another of Francis's biographers, from that day on, Francis always took care to call on all animals to praise and love their creator.

Now before we dismiss this story as a fun medieval fable, let us remember the words of the Gospel - you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

Because I think there is something quite deep and profound in Bonaventure's story. Francis is told to proclaim the gospel, but he doesn't proclaim it to humans. Francis believed that the whole family of creation – not just humanity - deserves more respect and ought to be invited to praise God. Maybe when we listen to Francis chiding himself for not inviting the birds to join in the chorus of praise to God, we should take that as a call to do a little bit of self-reflection.

Another story of Francis, where he tried to bring creation into the human festivities of God is when he asked the Holy Roman Emperor to request that citizens scatter grain along the roads on Christmas day to feed the birds and other animals. Walls, he felt, should be rubbed with food and stabled animals should be provided with a feast – all deserved to take part in Christmas.

From what I can tell the Emperor politely ignored that request. I suspect he thought Francis was a little odd, but it makes me feel justified for buying my cats Christmas presents. So, on the topic of self-reflection, let us not forget that in Mark 16:15, Jesus calls on his disciples, not to proclaim the good news to all of humanity, but to proclaim it to the whole of creation.

When I preached on Revelation 4 a few weeks ago, I spoke about how of the four living creatures in the throne room, only one was a human yet all four were active participants in the action that was going on there. We are not the only thing in the throne room. We are part of a greater family of creation.

We are precious to God, but we aren't the only thing that is. And like the birds in the story of Francis who waited to be dismissed before leaving, the Bible tells us countless stories of creation responding to the call of God.

Some great examples can be found in the book of Jonah; God calls on a whale to swallow the unwilling prophet. Then when Jonah throws a tantrum later in the book - God won't destroy the city of Nineveh - a plant grows over him at God's command, giving him shade, only to be subsequently chewed down by a worm, at God's command. The book ends with God rebuking Jonah, "should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left **and also many animals?**"

Creation matters. We are part of a wider family, not God's only creation.

We find another example in Luke 12:6 when Jesus poses "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God."

Creation matters. While we are important, we are only a part of the greater whole. All of it is seen and known to God.

Francis understood this and while I am not necessarily suggesting that we all go out and start preaching to birds, although my cats have heard a few of my sermons over the past year, there are definitely things we can do to be better stewards:

- One easy thing to consider is to look at purchasing in season and local produce as much as possible. Out-of-season produce needs to either be moved across the world or produced in a heated greenhouse. Both of these things contribute to environmental destruction.

- There are constant community tree planting schemes and efforts to control pests which undermine biodiversity. All of these are things we can individually join in with, if we have the time.
- Some people set up 'bug hotels', establish bee colonies and place *ruru* boxes.
- We can also consider how we can lower the emissions we produce, personally. Some people might be able to afford an EV. I definitely can't. But I can think about how often I need to get in the car and go places. Do I need to make that journey on my own, or can it wait a bit? Is it possible to use public transport? Can I do this at an off-peak times? Do I need to have the heating on at the moment?

I can't tell you exactly what it is that you can do to be a better steward of creation. That's going to be different for all of us and I am sure you are thinking of things that people can do that I have missed. Share them with people over morning tea after the service!

I can tell you though, that all of creation is the work of God and that makes us a part of a greater family of creation, to which we have a duty of care.