



ST ANDREW'S EPSOM
AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

All Regions ▾

Sermons > Sermons 2015

Home

Marriage, Ordination,
Hope

Christmas Pageant
2015

Sermons

Sermons 2015

Sermon 20 December
2015

Sermon 13 December
2015

Sermon 29 November
2015

Sermon 22 November
2015

Sermon 15 November
2015

Sermon 8 November
2015

Sermon 1 November
2015 - All Saints Day

Sermon 25 October
2015

Sermon 11 October
2015

**Sermon 4 October
2015**

Sermon 13 September
2015

Sermon 16 August
2015

Sermon 26 July 2015

Sermon 19 July 2015

Sermon 12 July 2015

Sermon 5 July 2015

Sermon 28 June 2015

Sermon 21 June 2015

Sermon 14 June 2015

Sermon 7 June 2015

Sermon 4 October 2015

Like Share 0

When we talk about saints we often step into the murky waters where fact, fiction and mythology all swirl together. For some the lack of clarity regarding the lives of particular saints is a sticking point. Did it happen this way or not, is a question that leaps to many critically minded people. As a result, the difficulties in sifting fact from fiction has meant that for many the lives of the saints don't really seem to have a place in our modern world.

Our sources for the lives of many saints are of the literary genre known as hagiography. That word, which today is often used to describe sugar coated accounts of anyone's life, historically referred specifically to the lives of Christian saints. As our modern interpretation of the word suggests, the hagiographies of saints typically put the best spin of the life of the saint in question. Hagiography typically played down deficiencies in a person's character and emphasised or even exaggerated the good. The reason for this was because hagiography was an evangelistic tool that sought to draw people to Christianity by describing the lives of particular heroes of the faith. This is not dissimilar to the 20th century development of comic book superheroes who inspired young readers with their incredible powers. The lives of the saints were in a sense, the super heroes of another time.

There are many sources that recount the life of St Francis, but among the most loved are the collection of stories known as *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*. These stories that were recorded over the 150 years following the death of the saint, are a good example hagiography. They certainly play up the positive aspects of Francis while ignoring many of the negatives, because in truth Francis was very hard on himself and many of his followers. Yet, unlike the stories of modern superheroes, there are factual accounts mixed in with the embellishments.

One of my favourite stories from the little flowers is the account of a wolf. The story goes that when Francis came to small village he heard stories of vicious wolf that had killed a number of small children and had even attacked a number of adults. Francis went out from the village into the surrounding forest where he encountered this large wild animal. The story tells us that Francis first spoke with the wolf telling him that all the surrounding land had become his enemy. But Francis then told the wolf that he had come to make peace between the wolf and the local people, so that he would no longer harm them and that they might forgive him.

The wolf responded by showing Francis that he accepted his offer and walked with him back into the village. Seeing Francis enter the village with the large wolf beside him, the whole town gathered together. Francis told them that the wolf had promised to cause no more harm, if they in turn promised to give him all he required. In short, Francis asked them to care for the wolf. The villagers agreed and the wolf never harmed another person.

It sounds a little too good to be true doesn't it? The story continues and tells us that the wolf lived out the rest of his years in peace and when he died he was buried in a place of honour. The legend claimed that the wolf was buried in the church of St Francis of the peace. It's at this point that the story goes from quaint to completely unbelievable even if these is a beauty to the story.

And yet, there is an altogether different story found from different sources that tell us that during renovations to the church in 1872, a stone slab was uplifted in

Sermon 31 May 2015 -
Trinity Sunday

Sermon - Sunday 24
May 2014 - Pentecost

Sermon 10 May 2015

Sermon 26 April 2015

Sermon 19 April 2015

Sermon 5 April -
Easter Day

Vicar's Annual Report
2015

Sermon 8 March 2015

Sermon 1 March 2015

Sermon 15 February
2015

Sermon 8 February
2015

Sermon 18 January
2015

Sermons 2014

Sermons 2013

Sermons 2012

Sermons 2011

Sermons 2010

Sermons 2009

The Resistance

Special Services

The St Andrew's
Soapbox Lectures

Services

Saint Andrew's Choir

Parish Groups and
Events

Contact

that very church revealing an ancient skeleton of, you guessed it, a large wolf. It would seem that maybe these exaggerated embellished stories, may point us towards an exceptional life embodied by the person we call St Francis.

It is not the discovery of that skeleton that attracts me to this story. The power of these accounts of St Francis do not rest upon whether they record accurate history or not. Their power is in the practical theology demonstrated in the story, which remains a fundamental part of Franciscan spirituality.

The story of the wolf reminds us how our Judaeo-Christian inheritance has created a very negative view of the world we inhabit. This negative view of nature was articulated clearly by Augustine when he developed his concept of the fall. It was Augustine who took the story of Adam and Eve and developed a theology that suggested that the earth was broken and flawed, and that this life was something to be endured. In the story the wolf embodies these negative attitudes. Nature is something we fear, that we wrestle with and if we are not able to dominate it, we drive it from our presence.

The actions of Francis embody a different attitude and understanding of nature an understanding that introduced an important theological alternative to the dominant ideas of Augustine. The miraculous work undertaken by Francis was not his courage in confronting a wild animal. The miracle is that Francis persuaded a human community to change their relationship with nature. Instead of having an antagonistic relationship with nature, Francis suggests a harmonious relationship. His simple suggestion to the human community of behaved positively towards the wolf in the hope that the wolf would reciprocate the kindness was a radical theological statement.

After centuries of Christian thought that devalued our relationship with creation, Francis dared to re-evaluate that position. We should not remember Francis as a caricature, as the saint who preached to animals. Francis engaged deeply with creation because he found it was deeply enriching to do so. Francis discovered that creation was not flawed and broken, but was enriched with life. By engaging with creation Francis rediscovered the presence of the divine life in all things. He responded to that experience by affirming the innate goodness of creation.

It is no small wonder that many secular organisations today, have St Francis as their Patron.[1] We continue to live in a world where the dominant Judeo-Christian attitude towards the natural world is that nature is a servant and it is our right to exploit her. Christianity does bear some responsibility for practices of environmental exploitation that are harming our world. It is important that we acknowledge that. But in doing so we can also call upon voices like that of St Francis, who offers a theological basis for the care of creation. To listen to the voice of Francis is to hear that the world is valuable, an expression of divine love and something that must be protected.

- Reverend Richard Bonifant

[1] For example *The Humane Society of the United States*

Like Share