

11 October

Today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah is a passage that is sometimes chosen for a funeral service. It speaks about a future time of peace and joy; on the holy mountain the Lord God will prepare for all people a banquet of rich food and fine wine. Sadness, suffering and death will disappear. Joyful feasting is the promise. We can identify with this reading when we think back to times of a particular party or celebration with family and friends, an occasion that people remember and refer back to in the future.

Contrast this with today's Gospel. A wedding feast is prepared and guests are invited but they all seem to be busy to attend. As usual, Jesus uses stories like this as a metaphor for discipleship. He is the wedding feast of God; he speaks the word of faith and discipleship; Jesus proclaims the kingdom but people are not interested or busy and they go off to do other things. A wedding feast or celebration is something occasional but we gather here every Sunday because Jesus is our feast of faith; here we belong, here we are nourished, here we deepen our call as disciples of Jesus, here we build up the parish community as the Body of Christ in Fitzroy, here we welcome visitors to also become members of this feast of faith and joy.

I was thinking a great deal about these readings of feasts, of joyful celebration, of the gift of faith that transforms our lives. Last Sunday, the Church celebrated the 800th anniversary of St Francis of Assisi. If there has ever been a saint in the Christian tradition that can speak across history, across centuries, across generations of people, it is St Francis of Assisi. This rich young man gave up the wealth of his family in order to embrace a life of poverty, simplicity, humility and love of creation. But what do we notice about the life of St Francis of Assisi? It wasn't a miserable poverty or a resentful humility. Francis of Assisi embraced a life of complete Gospel joy. His joy was contagious and infectious and many others followed this itinerant missionary. At a time when so many individuals and organisations are concerned about the environment and of caring for creation, St Francis of Assisi was doing this centuries ago. His Canticle of Creation is a joyful proclamation of God's creation, for the beauty and splendour of this gift, phrases such as Sister Earth, Brother Fire, Sister Water, Brothers Wind and Air.

We have today thousands of local, national and international bodies that speak about the beauty and majesty of creation, but 800 years ago St Francis of Assisi was singing a song of faith. He was praising God for the banquet of his creation, praising Jesus as the ultimate feast of life, goodness and beauty, drawing thousands of new disciples to join him on the path of missionary and humble Gospel service and singing this and many other songs of joy. That joyful proclamation transformed the Church and society and culture of his time. He lived so long ago but his life and legacy is before us today. May St Francis of Assisi continue to speak to us words of Gospel joy, witness and humility.

As an historian, you know that I am always on the lookout for significant dates and anniversaries. While today is the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, it is also the anniversary of the opening of Vatican II in Rome in 1962. That council was opened by John XXIII, a humble pope who wanted to renew the life and mission of the Church and engage in genuine dialogue with the modern world. He too was a man of simplicity who wanted the Church to decrease the number of condemnations issued every week and instead recover the language that joyfully proclaimed the Gospel, especially the urgent need for peace having personally witnessed the first and second World Wars. John XXIII lived during a time of genuine fear of nuclear war and he urged the leaders of nations to find every opportunity to seek the path of peace. Each of his successors has done this and Pope Leo continues to demand urgent peace for our world almost every week.

As we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, Jesus invites us to this banquet of life and joy. He nourishes our lives with Gospel hope and joy as the world faces multiple challenges; global conflict that does not end, cost of living crisis that causes many to suffer, testing and divisive debates in our community about migration issues, criticism of political leaders who should be producing practical solutions rather than playing more political games. Here at this feast, St Francis of Assisi continues to sing to us his joyful canticle of Creation, praising God who in Jesus invites us to the banquet of life, who calls us to share this joy with others and who makes us disciples of hope and light for our world. Like St Paul, we gather before the One who gives us strength and fills our hearts with Gospel joy as we sing his song of praise for the gift of faith and creation.