

1st October – Make me an instrument of your peace

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** Saint-Saëns: Carnival of the Animals, Aquarium (2'46")
<https://youtu.be/KOx7zmO5ppw?si=RRUQlyStWIKxcOS->

2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT

Welcome to you all, those of you here in the church and all of you joining us online this morning. You are welcome here, just as you are.

This is a community in which we try to support each other on our spiritual journeys through life. And this hour is, as always, a chance for each of us to realign ourselves with all that we hold sacred. It is an invitation to give thanks for the wonder of creation, to reconnect with the divine spirit, and to surrender to the divine mystery in the company others.

You may know that this Wednesday, 4th October, is the Feast Day of St Francis. Of all the saints, I suspect Francis is the favourite of Unitarians. In fact, Jon M. Sweeney, author of several books on Francis, says he's a favourite of Christians and also "widely admired by Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, spiritual independents, agnostics, and others, including people of native spiritual paths." (I'm pretty sure we're in that mix somewhere.) Sweeney goes on: 'He was not a theological person at all. He was even what I'd call anti-theological. Francis tended to talk and write only about those things that he put into practice in his own life.'

So today's service is inspired by St Francis and the things he put into practice in his own life. We'll be hearing some stories and words and music written by him or associated with him.

But first, as is our custom, let us begin this time of words, music and contemplation by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.

(Do please light one with me if you are able to do so.)

LIGHT CHALICE St. Francis of Assisi vocation prayer

Most High, Glorious God,

enlighten the darkness of our minds.

Give us a right faith, a firm hope and a perfect charity,

so that we may always and in all things act according to Your Holy Will. Amen.

3. **PRAYER of St Francis of Assisi**

I discovered that this was not written by him. Did you know that? Apparently, the prayer first appeared in 1912 (Francis lived from 1181 to 1226, so around 700 years later) in a small spiritual magazine called *La Clochette* (meaning ‘the little bell’), published in Paris by a French priest called Father Esther Bouquerel. The prayer bore the title of *Belle priere a faire pendant la messe*; (excuse my French – literally) meaning “A Beautiful Prayer to Say During the Mass” and was published anonymously. The author could have possibly been Father Bouquerel himself, but the identity of the author remains a mystery.

Nevertheless, it is a very beautiful prayer and certainly feels in keeping with the spirit of St Francis. Here it is...

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Surely if we could all manage to put this prayer into practice even a little more, then the world would be a kinder, gentler and more peaceful place.

And now I'm going to invite you to sing the song version. The words are slightly different. Some of us have sung it a few times in our 'singalongs', and the tune is quite well known, so I hope you enjoy it. It's not in our hymnbooks but the words will appear on the screen.

4. **1st Hymn:** Make me a channel of your peace (remain sitting)

Make me a channel of Your peace.
Where there is hatred let me bring Your love.
Where there is injury, Your pardon Lord.
And where there's doubt, true faith in You.

Make me a channel of Your peace.
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, only light.
And where there's sadness, ever joy.

O Master grant that I may never seek,
so much to be consoled as to console.
To be understood as to understand.
To be loved as to love with all my soul.

Make me a channel of Your peace.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

In giving of ourselves that we receive.
And in dying that we're born to eternal life.

Words: Prayer of St Francis

Music by Sebastian Temple, arr by Randall DeBruyn

Francis's life was one of conversion: from the privileged son of a prosperous silk merchant and (by all accounts) a keen party-goer, to a penitent and self-educated hermit, and then to the founder of a spiritual movement focused on healing and friendship and helping people discover the joy and love of God in their lives. So quite a journey.

The story we're about to hear takes place long before his conversion

5. **STORY** The Story of Young Francis and the Beggar

Francis was working in his father's clothing shop, tending to wealthy customers. A poor, bedraggled man walked in. The man, one of the many beggars who lined the streets of Assisi, walked up to Francis and asked for money. We all know what the older Francis would have done, but the young Francis was busy, and so he did what busy people usually do: he impatiently told the man to wait his turn.

It wasn't such an unreasonable request. The beggar *had* interrupted a sale. He did smell. He was rude. And so Francis stood by and watched as the man, angered and dejected, stomped out of the store.

It wasn't long, however, before that inner prompting of conscience, or perhaps that outer tug of Grace that was always pulling at Francis' soul, compelled him to make amends. A few short moments after the beggar walked out, Francis told his customers to wait as he quickly ran out of the store and caught up with the beggar in the street. Then and there he placed a pile of coins into the man's hands.

6. COMMENTARY

It's interesting to hear this story from before Francis's conversion. He initially reacted as many of us might react when we're interrupted in the middle of doing something. I find this story quite heartening, because wonderful though it is to learn about people who seem to be enlightened, mystics, somehow perfect – it's also encouraging, to me anyway, to hear that they might have started off rather ordinary and flawed. Perhaps one of the differences with Francis, even in his earlier days, was that he not only felt the pang of conscience, but when he saw the beggar leave he acted on that impulse, and ran into the street after the beggar in order to make amends. We can imagine that the queue of customers in his shop weren't that happy about this, but he was prepared to inconvenience them, and possibly get himself into trouble with his father too. There's a spontaneity in him that seemingly isn't constrained by other people's expectations or disappointments, which doesn't get in the way of him doing what he feels is right – and maybe that's at the heart of things. Maybe that's part of what allowed him to open enough for enlightenment, or conversion, later on.

You may know of St Francis as a lover of nature. The current Pope Francis, named after the saint, has certainly evoked this love and concern for the environment. Our next hymn is from our purple hymn book. The words are based on canticle written by St Francis. It's called O Brother Sun and gives something of the flavour of Francis's love for nature, and more than that, a sense of his complete communion with it.

WE don't have a recording...so you know what that means! But it's a well-known tune.

7. 2nd HYMN 111 (P) O Brother Sun

O Brother Sun, you bring us light,
all shining round in fiery might.

O Sister Moon, you heal and bless,
your beauty shines in tenderness.

O Brother Wind, you sweep the hills,
your mighty breath both freshens and fills.

O Sister Water, you cleanse and flow
through rivers and streams, in ice and snow.

O Brother Fire, you warm our night
with all your dancing coloured light.

O Sister Earth, you feed all things,
all birds, all creatures, all scales and wings.

O Sister Death, you meet us here
and take us to our God so near.

O God of Life, we give you praise
for all your creatures, all your ways.

*Words © Sharon Anway, adapted from St Francis of Assisi
Traditional Scottish melody arr. © David Dawson*

It is common in churches – not so much in ours – to hold service for blessing pets on St Francis' feast day. And adults and children alike will bring their pets in to the service. I wasn't quite brave enough to suggest that. But who has a pet? Or has had a pet? Pets are very often much-loved companions and members of the family. As we come in to a time of reflection, you might like to bring to mind a pet or any animal you feel, or have felt a close connection with. Perhaps they are no longer with you on this earth, but still with you in spirit. As we enter the silence, imagine them being blessed with light and love.

8. REFLECTION/SILENCE

9. INTERLUDE Earth Song, Voces 8

https://youtu.be/-qZ4u_2ZAlc?si=SQK6n3ycPJDFiGle

Author Kent Nerburn says Francis always acted like "a person who had fallen in love." He saw beauty and brightness everywhere and, if we are to follow in his footsteps, he says, love must become a habit of our heart, an inclination of the Spirit.

And Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book 'Living, Buddha, Living Christ', tells the story of when St. Francis asked an almond tree to tell him about God, in just a few seconds the tree was covered with beautiful flowers. Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "St. Francis was standing on the side of the ultimate dimension. It was winter. There were no leaves, flowers, or fruits, but he saw the flowers."

Francis had that gift of the mystics. He could see the potential and the divine in everything, and perhaps more than anyone tried to live as Jesus had lived, and follow his teachings as closely as he could.

10. **STORY** Francis and the wolf of Gubbio

The people of the little Italian city of Gubbio are understandably very proud of their beautiful home.

Then one night a shadow comes out of the nearby woods and prowls the streets. In the morning the people of Gubbio find a mangled and gnawed dead body. This happens again and again.

Finally, an old woman says that she's seen a wolf on the streets at night. The terrified people decide to ask a holy man who has a reputation for being able to talk to animals for his help. They send a delegation to get St Francis.

They have very specific ideas on what St Francis should tell the wolf. First, he should preach to him, and remind him to obey the commandment against killing, and to

follow Christ's commandment about loving God and neighbours. And then just in case, since a wolf is, after all, a wolf, he should tell the wolf to move somewhere else.

Francis goes into the forest to meet the strange shadow, addressing it as Brother Wolf.

Then he returns to the town square. 'My good people of Gubbio, the answer is very simple, you must feed your wolf.'

The people are furious, especially with the suggestion that this uninvited beast in their midst is somehow to be regarded as their wolf.

But they do feed it. And the killing stops.

11. COMMENTARY

What do you think this story is about? I reckon there's a lot to it.

To being with there is St Francis' relationship with the animals, including this pesky wolf. He has no fear, no prejudice about the animal. Rather he immediately he regards this creature who is terrifying the people as 'Brother Wolf'. He meets the wolf as an equal. And he's able to talk to the wolf, it seems. Or if not talk exactly, he can commune spirit to spirit with the animal. Who is hungry. Of course, he is. That's why he's killing. And it's obvious that if the people are able to understand why the wolf is behaving in this way, and willing to meet his need, then the killing stops. It's a lesson in humility, isn't it, in striving to 'understand more than to be understood', and it's an example of seeing the potential and the spirit in each living thing. The potential for every living thing, however damaged or troubled, to be whole and to be healthy. In the same way as he saw flowers on the almond tree even in the middle of winter.

This is a story about loving our enemies – not loving their *behaviour*, which in the case of the wolf clearly had to be stopped – but meeting our enemies with open hearts and minds so we might come to understand why they do what they do.

But more than that, it's also a story about any lurking fears we may have within ourselves. The shadow, the monster, the thing that keeps us awake at night. It's a story about facing our own inner fears with compassion too, and trying to understand them rather than push them away.

We're being encouraged to shine a light – or allow god to shine a light – on our hidden, unconscious selves, to be willing to meet them and sit quietly and patiently with those dark places until we better understand them. Last week I was talking about autumn being a more contemplative season, and this is a time when we might simply be with our anxiety, or fear, or sadness, or depression and converse with them – if not in words then in spirit – and ask what they need in order to feel less anxious, less fearful, more at ease.

The invitation, then, is to consider who, or what, is the wolf in your life right now? And what do they need?

12. **THIRD HYMN** 147 (P) Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree

Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree,
water of life, flowing in me,
keeping me stable, nourishing me,
O fill me with living energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of love, softly draw near,
open my heart, lessen my fear,
sing of compassion, help me to hear,
O fill me with loving energy!

Spirit of nature, healing and free,

*spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of life, you are my song,
sing in my soul, all my life long,
gladden and guide me, keep me from wrong,
O fill me with sacred energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Arr David Dawson, words © Lyanne Mitchell

13. CLOSING WORDS St Francis

I have not attempted to give you a biography of St Francis. I think it's enough to know that he was a mystic, a lover, a seer. And a person with his own complications too. A couple of years before his death we're told he received stigmata - the signs of the suffering of Jesus on the cross – while on a mountain on his own body, which he did his best to hide. And 2 years after his death he was canonised – ie made a saint. Do look up his life if you're interested to know more.

I'm going to share some of his words to close in a moment. And then there will be a video from the Zeffirelli film Brother Sun, Sister Moon. Francis is portrayed as rather dreamy and idealistically, but it's a sweet song written and sung by Donovan called Lovely Day. At the end he sees the ruined church of San Damiano where he has a religious experience. [There's a mention of birds at the beginning but nothing after that.]

Now, wherever we are,
and in every place,

and at every hour,
throughout each time of each day,
may all of us honestly and humbly believe,
holding in our hearts
to love, honour,
adore, serve,
praise, bless,
glorify, exalt,
magnify, and give thanks
to the Most High and Eternal God,
Trinity and Unity.
Amen.

14. **CLOSING MUSIC** 'Lovely Day', Donovan (from Brother Sun, Sister Moon)

<https://youtu.be/gIXcaD-Zz7M?si=HNxKa3Y93Yl8h7Bh>