

Revd Michael Burns  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon :  
September 9, 2018 ~ “St Francis – preached in Assisi”

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I think we are now becoming very familiar with Francis of Assisi, born around 1181 and who died on 4 October in 1226. Francis was said to be a rebellious youth from a very wealthy family who had a difficult relationship with his father. After being imprisoned following capture whilst at war with a local city, Francis returned a changed man. He took to caring for disused churches and for the poor, particularly those suffering from leprosy. Whilst praying in a semi-derelict church, he heard God say these words ‘Go and repair my church which you see is falling down’. Eventually he realised that his wealth was holding him back from serving God and, despite his Father’s anger, he gave up his possessions and money. Others joined him and he prepared a simple rule for them all to live by: “Follow Jesus and walk in his footsteps”. As the numbers of followers grew, he organised them into an Order, with its emphasis on preaching the gospel of repentance and emphasising the poverty of Christ. Today the Society of St Francis is world-wide and many follow the Rule of St Francis. Of course our present Pope took the name Francis as a strong indication of the sort of Papacy he intended to create.

Amongst his many attributes, St Francis of Assisi was famous for his wonderful preaching. There is a well-known story that one day a young man, who wished to become a preacher, visited him and asked Francis if he could accompany him on his next preaching tour, to watch him in action. Francis readily agreed to his request. Soon he set out to preach in a nearby town and took the young man with him. As they entered the town, Francis began visiting many sick people in their homes. Frequently he stopped to talk with children and even joined in their games. Eventually he reached the large market square in the centre of town and Francis moved from stall to stall talking to the stall-holders, discussing the price of the produce, listening to their problems and offering them advice. Occasionally he helped peasants to unload their vegetables and gently soothed their tired donkeys. The young man waited patiently, hoping that Francis would soon gather the crowds around him and start preaching to them, but Francis seemed more than content just to move amongst the people and chat. Late in the afternoon, Francis headed for home. The young man followed behind, very disappointed. He had come all

this way to study the technique of this great preacher, but so far he had not learnt a thing. Unable to restrain himself any longer, the young man quickened his pace and caught up with him, blurting out: 'I thought you said you were going to preach today! And I don't mind telling you that I feel as though I have wasted my time.' Francis smiled gently and replied: 'but, my friend, I have been preaching! That's what it's all about. When I visit the sick, and play with the children and mingle with the people on market day; when I give them comfort, and advice, and let them talk to me; when I give them a helping hand to unload and take an interest in their donkeys - that is when I am really preaching God's word.

'Go and preach the Gospel to everyone - and use words if you must'. That well-known phrase, attributed to St Francis, is one that is central in the lives of many Christians, both clergy and people.

For it is not so much by words spoken as deeds done that we are known as Christians. Actions speak louder than words - that is my simple message for you this morning.

Just think about that phrase for a moment - 'actions speak louder than words'. What does it really mean? Human beings have much more of a capacity to remember something someone **does** than to remember things that are **said** - a salutary warning for those of us who spend some of our lives preaching!

For me as a priest, what good are my words spoken if they are not backed up actions done. I took Communion recently to a lady who lives alone - she was glad to share the bread and wine but even gladder when I made her a much-needed cup of tea. I would have failed if I had just swept out of her house and left her to struggle to make a cuppa for herself.

Now of course we all have to use words to communicate - and I am not suggesting otherwise, lest those who teach or preach become depressed at the seeming impossibility of their task or in case some of you decide never to speak again. I am not saying that at all. What I am saying is that there are different **ways** of communicating - and we don't just have to use our mouths.

There are so many ordinary things that ordinary people do that can be memorable - like the person who always has a ready smile, the person who always has a kind word, the person who is a great encourager, the person who is the one we can trust with our fears and our worries and who we know won't laugh or ridicule us.

Timothy Radcliffe, in his book 'What is the point of being a Christian' has written: "St Francis was a man who spoke through symbolic gestures to a world that was, like ours, in the process of profound transformation. Radcliffe quotes G K Chesterton: "The things that Francis

said were more memorable than the things he wrote. The things he did were more imaginative than the things he said...from the moment when he tore off his robes and flung them at his father's feet to the moment when he stretched himself in death on the bare earth in the pattern of the cross, his life was made up of these unconscious attitudes and unhesitating gestures". The late Fr Ken Leech did the same. In seeking to minister to the drug addicts and homeless of Soho, he spent nearly a year sitting in a café drinking coffee, deliberately not speaking to people unless they spoke first and simply trying to become part of the scenery.

Actions speak louder than words – that could certainly be the sub-heading for today's Gospel reading which has Jesus giving teaching to his disciples about how they should live, with some very specific Franciscan-like instructions about how they should behave and what they should do and not do, what they should say and not say.

Someone has written: 'You will very quickly forget what I may say – but you may remember what I do'. Let that encourage you as you take away with you one phrase from what I have said this morning: **'Actions speak louder than words'**.

*Not just a phrase to try to remember, but also a phrase to try to live by. Amen.*