

GREAT MEDICAL LIVES AND FAITH IN MEDICINE

ST FRANCIS AND THE LEPER, EMBRACING OUR DARK SIDE.

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One day while Francis was praying fervently to God he received an answer. "O Francis, if you want to know my will, you must hate and despise all that which hitherto your body has loved and desired to possess. Once you begin to do this, all that formerly seemed sweet and pleasant to you will become bitter and unbearable; and instead, the things that made you formally shudder will bring you great sweetness and content." Immediately he was compelled to obey the divine command and was led to actual experience.

For among all the unhappy spectacles of the world Francis naturally abhorred lepers; but one day he met a leper while he was riding near Assisi. Though the leper caused him no small disgust and horror, nevertheless, lest like a transgressor of a commandment he should break his given word, he got off the horse and prepared to kiss the poor man. But when the leper put out his hand as though to receive something, he received money along with a kiss. And immediately mounting his horse, Francis looked here and there about him; but though the plain lay open and clear on all sides, and there were no obstacles about, he could not see the leper anywhere.

Filled with wonder and joy as a result, after a few days he resolved to do the same thing again. He went to the dwelling places of the lepers, and visited their houses frequently and distributed alms among them generously, kissing their hands and lips with deep compassion. When he was approached by beggars, he was not content to give what he had – he wanted to give his whole self to them. At times he took off his clothes and gave them away, or ripped or tore pieces from them, if he had nothing else at hand.



Thus he exchanged the bitter for the sweet, and manfully prepared himself to carry out the rest. All this took place while Francis still lived and dressed as a layman in the world. (1)

It would seem that everything that is holy or approaching holiness, has accrued layer upon layer of goodness, and is good through and through. This is easily seen when so many stories in the Bible are studied, and once we start to tease away and dissect them we open an Aladdin's Cave of riches. Perhaps this is a way of identifying holiness, of discerning what is truly good from the mixed brew of good and bad that we inherited so long ago from the forbidden fruit in our ancestral Garden. Just as

we can analyse and keep seeing new levels of goodness and understanding in the Bible and especially in the Gospels, so to a degree can we see the same phenomenon in the accounts of the saints and of that very holy follower of Jesus, St Francis.

St Francis was radical, extreme, to some even laughable, but to others the closest any human has come to following Christ. He saw himself as a troubadour, a jester for Jesus, but also a herald of the Great King. His sermons and theological treatise were by and large acted out rather than delivered. St Francis was radical because Jesus of Nazareth was radical, and the Christianity that followed Jesus is radical (“I know all about you: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth!” (2)). And so we are (or should be as his Jesus’ followers) radical and see the radical nature of our calling; for we have been reborn through the Holy Spirit, we are a brand New Creation, we are the ultimate Evolutionary Step that evolutionists have completely overlooked! (3) We are commanded to walk out of darkness into the light and to change the world by loving those we would hate and to embrace where we would normally avoid and shun. (4)

So as radical Catholic Christians what can we learn from this passage that I believe is a layer cake of riches? From a superficial, swift-read point of view it suggests that the job is done! Francis formally abhorred lepers and is led to love them. We realise that we should do the same and then the world will be changed. Oh that Life was so easy! But let us dig a little deeper and go a little more slowly, because obeying such a command is far from easy, and dissecting a passage like this can release numerous nuggets of inspiration to help us on our way.

To begin with, Francis is praying fervently, longing to know as a young man what God’s will for him really is. The event takes place early in 1205 at the age of 24 while “Francis still lived and dressed as a layman in the world.” At the start of any enterprise or dialogue with God, fervent prayer has to come first! This handing over to God is the essential part of prayer that moves us on in our relationship with Him (5). How are we to be brave enough to do this? He might ask us to change our habits, give something up, or even worse do something unpleasant, just as He is asking Francis to do here, to “hate and despise all that hitherto your body has loved and desired to possess.” Small wonder we do not pray so fervently for God’s will! But how really silly and foolish we are! What do we pray for in each Our Father if not His Heavenly will? Still we cannot help but act out all over again the fear that our original ancestors felt in their Original Sin. We forget that all God wants for us is our good, and goes to (past, present and future together) extreme lengths to bring about good in our lives. He is, all good, supreme good, totally good, and He alone is good (6). All that is to do with God is good, and due to Francis’ radical appreciation of this, the Middle Ages in Europe, as reflected in the contemporary art of the time, were re-transformed from a world always seen as sinful and hostile to a place of warmth and God’ Presence. If we only let Him, God will come to our side, gently chide us for our lack of understanding, and then enlighten us as He did Francis and those on that seven-mile walk to Emmaus (7).

Francis was very middle class and had enjoyed the first 20 years of his life in a highly indulgent way surrounded the really “beautiful people” of his day. He was the son of a rich merchant, Pietro Bernadone, and his French wife, Pica. He was baptised Giovanni but called Francesco (the little Frenchman) as a nick name, due to the obvious French connection but also his father’s love for

France as a trading centre. All this was at a time at the turn of the 13th Century in Italy when the merchant class was gaining political power over the gentry. Francis was the most avid partygoer of his generation in Assisi. He loved the "good" life. He was essentially kind, but worldly, and filled with a desire for honour and chivalry. Francis' greatest horror was lepers. He enjoyed beauty in all the ways as does a spoilt youth, and lepers were the complete antithesis of everything that flattered, excited and pleased him. "According to his natural personality there was nothing that Francis found so repulsive as a leper."

God did not tell him specifically to go and kiss a leper. God's instructions to him are non-specific. God first wanted an essential change, a metanoia for Francis. He did not at this time (it came later in the little church of San Damiano) issue a mission manifesto. Our minds have to change before we have ears for a specific instruction. All our hang-ups, problems, phobias and unjustified fears that are truly legion have to be dealt with first. This is true "repentance" or conversion. It is a change in direction. It is what Jesus commanded at the very start of His earthy ministry (8). Francis always referred back to this experience we are studying as his true conversion experience.

In His awesome accuracy, just as He did with those He met in the Gospels, the Lord takes aim and tells him how to effect this conversion. He explains that he must hate and despise all that which hitherto his body has loved and desired to possess. It is breathtakingly advice, given in freedom, with no hint of coercion, for within it He presents Francis and us with the key - the key to unlock the door and set ourselves free from our psychological and even physical prisons. The key is in God referring to the body. Contrary to popular contemporary secular thought (it was probably the same in the 13th Century) we are not just our bodies, (and by bodies is meant every functioning bit of us including our brain and mind); we are something much bigger, our real, full complete self.

The American philosopher Eckhart Tolle (9) is able to demonstrate this unseen separation between the body/biological mind and the real self very simply (see also Hebrews 4:12). He shows how in the experiment of very basic contemplation we can easily become aware that there is a bit of us that thinks it is (and attempts to run) the whole of us, but is definitely not the whole of us. All that is necessary is for us to observe our mind working in the course of our every day activities, and how it reacts to what is presented to it (good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant). Mentally taking a step back, we can observe how instantly, without any voluntary thought, it reacts (often very strongly!) to circumstances and events. We come to realise that this is just the "programmed me" that is working. The "programmed me" is of course the Ego. The Ego (our collective subconscious thought processes) has become programmed throughout our lives as it seeks to protect us as best it can both physically and psychologically and instruct us instantly (without the need for any added thought) on what to do. Sadly, left to its own devices it operates from an unenlightened position because so much of its programming has been automatic, unthinking and unenlightened. It has grabbed advice from where it could, and so often has listened to voices that have been pragmatic and not spiritually wise. The Prince of this world taken advantage of it and affected it by distorting the absolute Truth. This is our dark side because we are usually unaware of it and how it works. It operates in the dark until the light of Wisdom shines on it and shows it up. Until then we cannot see it, and it certainly cannot see properly. "I once was blind," said both the blind man who was asked to wash in the Pool of Siloam, and John Newton the slave ship captain, "but now I see."

However in a paradoxical way our dark sides are usually far from hidden to the world! We wear them on our arms for all to see, as this is the way many of us behave most of the time! We are like the Emperor in his new clothes and it is our true complete selves that remain hidden. When we mentally stop (10), and observe dispassionately the workings of our mind we instantly become aware of what our thoughts are analysing and telling us (and if we are honest, often in error). We no longer automatically assume that all these thoughts are us, they are simply in us as a bit of clever brain/ mind mechanics trying to deliver what they think they should. They are just doing a job, like an arm picking up a pint, but in our ignorance and lack of reflection we have allowed them, in the absence of higher thought, to control and to dominate us. As we become aware of this we realise that something bigger than these thoughts is observing them. This is the real, complete, fully conscious us.

Jean-Paul Sartre had a brilliant moment when he looked at Descartes' statement "I think, therefore I am" and realised that "The consciousness that says "I am" is not the consciousness that thinks." When we are aware that we are thinking, that awareness is not part of the thinking. It is a different dimension of consciousness. If there were nothing but thought then we would not be aware we were thinking!

Another helpful exercise is to realise how our bodies are very much set in time (look at them to see this!), but our bigger, complete selves are not. Our bodies and the mechanical analytical parts of our brains work in the finite, in the world, analysing and automatically giving ideas for solutions, but in only a second of the "stilling", of being truly aware of the Present Moment, we realise that the past and future at that moment do not exist and we can become aware that only a continuing Present or Now exists (11). There is in our existence nothing else. This awareness too was sacrificed at the Fall when fear, regret, and remorse introduced the time span. Note how the Serpent says "Did God really say?" and "You will be like gods."(12). Only our full self can appreciate that and it is only then in the full forgiveness of our past hurts and the full trust in the future that we can fully live in this transforming "Now" that Jesus tells us to (13).

Francis was not told to hate and despise what he (as a complete person) loved, but what his body loved; and was able to see the difference. He quickly understood how unenlightened his basic workings were. He prayed very shortly after this incident before the large crucifix in the tumble down church of San Damiano outside Assisi, "O alto e glorioso Dio, illumine le tenebre del cuore mio" (enlighten the darkness of my heart). He called his body Brother Ass and usually dealt with Brother Ass as if he were a separate person that just happened to be attached to him. He saw Brother Ass as an unbridled beast that so readily turned this way or that away from the way it should have been going. Within this enlightenment lay Francis' basis for the life of Penance, of specifically not doing what Brother Ass wanted but what he as the "Bigger-than-Brother Ass" Francis knew was good, and therefore what was God's will.

All this is saying is that our "bodies" do not really know, in their unenlightened way, what is totally good for us, and repeatedly make pragmatic, short-term decisions. So what our bodies love and desire is not what we in our enlightened or true selves in their entirety know they should love and desire. What eventually our enlightened selves see is that they love "Love" which is God Himself/Herself/Itself (to be fashionably PC, though St Julian of Norwich wrote along these lines long

before PC was thought of (14)). In our stupidity, because we insist on doing what we want (or have been tempted into) we get it all topsy-turvy. If we are honest we realise we have not a clue when it comes to making ourselves happy. Just look at the dailies! When we allow His will in everything to unfold (and even unfold despite our hindrance), and immerse ourselves in gratitude rather than accountability, we will soon be astonished that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (15). A complete readjustment happens like turning an iPhone upside down. All that formally seemed sweet becomes bitter, and all that made us shudder brings contentment. Francis went on to understand this to such an extent that when he talked about one of the Lady Virtues, Lady Holy Obedience (it was the age of chivalry), he says “Holy Obedience puts to shame all natural and selfish desires, it mortifies our lower nature and makes it obey the Spirit and our fellow men. Obedience subjects a man to everything on earth, and not only to men, but to all the beasts as well and to the wild animals, so that they can do what they like with him, as far as God allows them.” (16) Such liberation! Only like this can we, like Francis, relax and delight in our fraternity with all Creation and be a brother or sister to every atom in existence.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross makes the end-point of her Five Stages of Grief the moment of acceptance (17), of accepting where we are, here and now, in the present, of eventually allowing what has to be God’s will for us to be done, and it is a great place of peace. We have a dear ex-neighbour near Bath who at the time of writing has now reached this place with her slowly metastasising mesothelial tumour, and is able to talk freely about her gratitude for the past and her hope for the future. Saints galore from St Paul to Merlin Carothers (18) (19), as well as our own Sunday Liturgy (20) tell us to always and everywhere and in all things, to give thanks and praise where we are and not wait for somewhere else for it all to be “OK”. Perhaps this is the basis of Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart.

If something is, it has to be by His will that it is, or it would not be. It is interesting that the world with its secular view sees the creation of the world in the same light as it regards all other incidences – an accident.

We are never alone; He is with us, Emanuel. We have to pray, to reflect, and to contemplate. Francis “manfully prepared himself to carry out the rest.” It is not easy. The teaching goes on for the rest of our lives! I have to be re-born and re-converted every day. We may not find a leper in front of us but whatever he, she or it, is, will be the very best possible thing in front of us for that moment. What is more He will be in it, as He was in the Leper who appeared on the road in front of St. Francis. Indeed Francis immediately afterwards recognised that the Lord was the Leper, and that by embracing Him he embraced his own dark and mysterious side that was being invited out of the darkness.

Only in the very final part of his life, after another 20 years on the road, when the Order had risen in numbers to tens of thousands of friars, all with so many differing ideas as to how the order should be shaping, was Francis able to truly identify Perfect Joy within the ugliest of human experiences, rejection. (21) The Lord had promised “things that had made you formally shudder will bring you great sweetness and content”, and we, and even our sad Egos, are included in this promise of sweetness, contentment and joy. For so long our dark sides have worked overtime in shifting blame, guilt and responsibility, in order to satisfy their erroneous functioning which throughout our lives have covered our own deficiencies in most dishonest ways, averting our gaze and rejecting

anyone who might remind us of our real selves. Our Egos have hidden, controlled, boasted, dared, indulged, abused and exterminated all and everything in a frantic attempt to survive at all costs. Our guilt and failings have been shifted onto others and we have become repulsed by them. Our Egos that have masqueraded as friends as they continuously chanted of the promised delights to come, have robbed us of the beauty of the Present Moment, and fallen prey to the Enemy.

With our true selves locked in the darkness, we dared not look at ourselves for shame. Now in that True Light, in forgiveness, in total trust, at last we meet ourselves and embrace our dark side, our Ego. We get off that lofty horse of self pride (even worse than Brother Ass) that the Ego had provided, and find ourselves confronting the Leper who is Jesus, and who in Jesus is also us, to lead us to "the complete us". Now realising we are the lepers, we find ourselves in unworthiness and shame putting out our hand for the most basic, tainted and undignified of identities and rewards, money; for this is all we think we are worth (see also St. Mark 14;10). Then, at last, in Love, we are surprised to find ourselves embraced by Love, and at last raised up to being someone who is loved. In Jesus we start to embrace God, others and ourselves, as we slowly are assimilated into and become Jesus. Christ in us embraces all: ourselves, others and God. Such is the deep Mystery of the Incarnation for those who wish to know His Holy Will.

God gave and keeps on giving to each one of us a whole body, a whole soul, a whole life. He created us and redeemed us, and He will save us by His mercy alone. He has done and keeps on doing everything good for us.

St. Francis of Assisi Rule of 1221. Chapter XXII

*Out of His infinite glory, may He give you the power through His Spirit for your hidden selves to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God.*

*St. Paul to the Ephesians 3:14-19*

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