

**15th Sunday After Pentecost, 17th September 1017,
Feast of the Stigmata of St Francis of Assisi
Sermon by Br Luke efo**

From the letter of Br Elias announcing the death of Br Francis.

“I announce to you a great joy and a new miracle. It is a sign which has been unheard of from the beginning of time except in the son of God, Christ the Lord. Not long before his death, our brother and our father was seen to resemble the crucified Lord, bearing in his body the five wounds which are the marks of Christ.

His hands and his feet had the wounds of nails and were pierced on each side, bearing the marks and showing the colour of nails. His side seemed open with a lance and often bled. But after his death his appearance was most beautiful. It shone with a wonderful radiance and gave joy to all who saw him.

When he preached the Kingdom of God, when he turned the hearts of his listeners, when he brought the foolish to the prudence of the just, he made ready for the Lord a new people throughout the world.”

For me, the gift of the Stigmata, is the absolutely defining moment of Francis life. Greater than the dream at Spoleto, and the Crucifix speaking at San Damiano. Why? Well for three reasons.

First, it echoes St Paul’s words in the letter to the Galatians that we just heard. “I bear in my body the marks of Christ” (Galatians 6:17). Second, it was the answer to his ardent prayer. Third, I believe it is the key to understanding his religious life. It reveals to us the secret of the man we still struggle to fully comprehend.

Interestingly, could one suggest that in the passage from Galatians St Paul was also referring the Stigmata. I think most scholars say he was meaning the many beatings he received while travelling around during his ministry. Perhaps they are right, but it is nonetheless interesting to speculate and wonder.

But let’s return to Francis and my three assertions.

St Paul and Francis were both passionate disciples. Their itinerant lives meant they were always moving, always spreading the message of the gospel. It is perfectly reasonable to say, that they were not going to be welcome in some places and would be flogged for it. We know Paul was and Francis’s father locked him up and beat him. Both men therefore suffered physical harm and wounding for their discipleship. They both bore marks that were not the Stigmata.

The Franciscan sources tell us that Francis wanted to experience the love that Christ had for us. Francis would have seen this as a natural extension of his literally living the way Jesus did. The mendicant, poverty life was hard. Francis knew this, he had been raised in luxury.

So I think in his literal mind, he saw that in order to sustain the wandering poor life, there had to be something so powerful, that it rendered the hardships as inconsequential. The only thing this could be, was amazing love. Hence that was what Francis sought. Simply put, I'm suggesting that Francis said to himself: If Jesus could endure this for me, then in my love for him, I can endure it to.

The Stigmata was confirmation for Francis that he has been right. Love lay at the core of the mystery he was trying to plumb. In Orthodox icons of Jesus, we often see him surrounded by a mandora. An oval shape, often blue but always with a black border around the actual image of Jesus. Why? Because the black represents the unknowable mystery that is Christ. What I'm saying is that Francis was trying to enter that black border, to get as close to Jesus as he could.

As he lay dying Francis is said to have told the brothers gathered at his side: "My task is done, may Christ teach you to do yours." I don't think Francis ever had any intention of establishing a religious order. I think it grew up around him. His literal devotion was new, his personality was infectious and the ardour with which he was consumed, magnetic. People who came into contact with him, could not help but be drawn into the whirlwind, that was his life.

So why is it the Stigmata the key? We are told Francis tried to conceal the wounds. He did not want them to be public, so they must have been intensely, deeply, personal. Unlike other people with the Stigmata, Francis' wounds on his hands and feet were not holes. Elias makes it clear they resembled the nails. His devotion to Jesus and his trying to understand the reasons for Jesus' passion, had brought Francis to the foot of the cross.

Francis grasped very early in his journey that it was there that the answer lay, but he couldn't fathom it. He could not span the gulf between what he knew and what he felt. This is what I believe he was searching for all along. The key that would unlock the mystery of the experience of the crucifixion.

He was seeking the tangible emotion, behind, and in, the need for the reconciliation of creation, with its creator.

Francis' wounds thus, are not those of the resurrected Jesus, these would be the holes. Francis has the wounds of the crucified Jesus. The wounds Jesus had received while he was still on the tree. When he saw the crucified Jesus as a seraph, Francis entered

the mystery of Christ on the cross. The encounter was so intense, so consuming, so unifying, that Francis bore the marks of that union on his flesh.

Francis was, I believe, gifted with the emotion he had yearned for. It came at the same instant that he was gifted with entering the mystery of the Divine. He had transcended this world, as was already in the next. His quest was completed, and his knowledge and his emotions, his heart and his head, had merged. He no longer sought, he had found.

Little wonder then he met his physical death so warmly. He had already entered paradise.