



Francis and the Wolf
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Year A, Feast of St Francis
The Prayer of St Francis,
Matthew 11:25-30
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When we talk about saints we often step into the murky waters where fact, fiction and mythology all swirl together. For some the lack of clarity regarding the lives of particular saints is a sticking point. Did it happen this way or not, is a question that leaps to many critically minded people. As a result, the difficulties in sifting fact from fiction has meant that for many, the lives of the saints are not unlike mythology that doesn't seem to have a place in our modern world. I'd suggest that the recent theatrical version of the Odyssey goes against the overall trend.

Our sources for the lives of many saints are of the literary genre known as hagiography. That word, which today is often used to describe sugar coated accounts of a person's life, historically referred specifically to the lives of Christian saints. As our modern interpretation of the word suggests, the hagiographies of saints typically put the best spin on the life of the saint in question. Hagiography typically played down deficiencies in a person's character and emphasised or even exaggerated the good. The reason for this was because hagiography was an evangelistic tool that sought to draw people to Christianity by describing the lives of particular heroes of the faith. This is not dissimilar to many comic book superheroes who inspire young readers with their incredible powers. The lives of the saints were in a sense, the superheroes of another time.

Today we are celebrating the life of St Francis, and he is certainly a person remembered pretty favourably by history. There are many sources that recount the life of St Francis, but I'd argue that the most loved are the collection of stories known as *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*. These stories that were recorded over the 150 years following the death of the saint, are a good example of hagiography. They certainly play up the positive aspects of Francis while ignoring many of the negatives, because in truth Francis could be very hard on himself and many of his followers. Yet, unlike the stories of modern superheroes, there are factual accounts mixed in with the glowing embellishments.

One of my favourite stories from the little flowers is the account of a wolf. The story goes that when Francis came to small village, he heard stories of vicious wolf that had killed a number of small children and had even attacked a number of adults. Francis went out from the village into the surrounding forest where he encountered this large wild animal. The story tells us that Francis first spoke with the wolf telling him that all the surrounding land had become the wolf's enemy. But Francis then told the wolf that he had come to make peace between the wolf and the local people, so that he would no longer harm them and that they might forgive him.

The wolf responded by showing Francis that he accepted his offer and walked with him back into the village. Seeing Francis enter the village with the large wolf beside him, the whole town gathered together. Francis told them that the wolf had promised to cause no more harm, if they in turn promised to give him food and safety. In short, Francis asked the people to care for the wolf. The villagers agreed and the wolf never harmed another person.

It sounds a little too good to be true, doesn't it? The story continues and tells us that the wolf lived out the rest of his years in peace and when he died, he was buried in a place of honour. The legend claims that the wolf was buried in the church of St Francis of the peace. It's at this point that the story goes from quaint to completely unbelievable.

And yet, there is an altogether different story found from different sources that tell us that during renovations to that church in 1872, a stone slab before the altar was uplifted revealing an ancient skeleton of, you guessed it, a large wolf. Perhaps this story of St Francis was not embellished as much as we may have thought.

It is not the discovery of that skeleton that attracts me to this story. The power of these accounts of St Francis do not rest upon whether they record accurate history or not. Their power is in the practical theology demonstrated in the story, which remains a fundamental part of Franciscan spirituality.

The story of the wolf reminds us how our Judaeo-Christian culture created a very negative view of the world we inhabit. This negative view of nature was articulated clearly by Augustine when he developed his concept of the fall. It was Augustine who took the story of Adam and Eve and developed a theology that suggested that the earth was broken and flawed, and that this life was something to be endured rather than embraced. For many in the ancient world nature was something to fear. And certainly, large wolves are something to fear.

Yet the actions of Francis embody a different attitude and understanding of nature, an understanding that introduced an important theological alternative to the ideas of Augustine. The miraculous work undertaken by Francis was not his courage in

confronting a wild animal. The miracle is that Francis persuaded a human community to change their relationship with nature. Instead of having an antagonistic relationship with nature, Francis suggests a harmonious relationship. His simple suggestion to the human community that they care for the wolf, was a radical theological statement. Francis showed us the importance of loving and caring for this world, even the parts we are frightened of.

We should not remember Francis as a caricature, as the saint who preached to animals. Francis engaged deeply with creation because he found it was deeply enriching to do so. Francis discovered that creation was not flawed and broken but was worth experiencing and loving. By engaging with creation Francis rediscovered the presence of the divine life in all things.

It is no small wonder that many secular organisations today, have St Francis as their Patron.¹ We continue to live in a world where the dominant attitude towards the natural world is that nature is a servant, and it is our right to exploit her. Christianity does bear some responsibility for practices of environmental exploitation that are harming our world. It is important that we acknowledge that. But in doing so we can also call upon voices like that of St Francis, who offers a theological basis for the care of creation. To listen to the voice of Francis is to hear that the world is valuable, an expression of divine love and something that must be protected. Amen.

¹ For example *The Humane Society of the United States*