

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity | 4 October 2026 | 10:45 Eucharist

There are three words which unlock our readings today. The first word is 'stone', used as an image of a new beginning. The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, the rock that anchors the foundation of the church and gives it permanence and security.

Like the apostles preaching in Jerusalem after Pentecost, like St Peter, like St Paul, Matthew reaches to Psalm 118 for its language of stone to speak about the risen Jesus. This is the one who is executed outside the city walls by human beings, but raised from the dead by God to become the foundation of a new community. This is a community of salvation for all people, and how it comes into being is dramatically illustrated by the parable of the wicked tenants.

The disaster that befalls the wicked tenants is not the end of the story. The tragic murder of the landowner's son is transformed. In turn the meaning of the death of Jesus transforms the world and fulfils Matthew's big vision of God's inclusion of all in his purposes of salvation. The stone is repurposed – rejected but now the most significant of all building blocks. Through the cross and resurrection the ancient people of God makes the transition to the new inclusive community of God's people.

The second word is 'zeal', found in the Letter of Paul to the Philippian church. Paul self-describes : 'As to zeal, a persecutor the church'.

'Zeal' is not an accidental word. The word comes from a tradition that includes the prophet Elijah who defended the kingdom of Israel from evil monarchs and false prophets. It was Elijah's zeal for the living God that brought the kingdom safely through times of danger.

Paul saw himself as zealous for Israel and the old traditions. He saw the growth of the early church as a threat to all he held precious in his upbringing not least the temple and the law. As a 'new Elijah' he sets off to make that truth known to Christians in Damascus, by whatever means necessary.

We know the rest of the story- a zeal transformed in his encounter with the risen Jesus, a moment when everything in Paul's life up to then becomes as loss, or in his down-to-earth language - rubbish, excrement, refuse. Such words underline Paul's transformation. Now transformed to know nothing but Christ and the power of his resurrection.

'Stone', 'zeal' – and third word is a small one – 'you'. And it's 'you' in the personal and singular meaning. Laying down the foundation for all that is to follow in the life of ancient Israel, the Ten Commandments form a baseline. They are guidelines for how God's community is to live together. It was the Law and its central place in Israel's communal life that Paul was zealous for.

Zealous now for Christ alone, he does not reject the law, but he rejects the confidence he once had in the law that it would bring salvation. Now his confidence is in Christ who offers the gift of righteousness through his death and resurrection.

Whilst the law continues to inform Paul's life it's because Christ fulfils the law not human beings. In the Ten Commandments we are instructed to remember who God is and what he has done. We are called to love God, honour our families and respect our neighbours. Without these commitments no community can function. The new community is called to live in the image of God and each one of us as individual members is called to take up that responsibility for ourselves. That is why it's 'you', in the singular; 'you', meaning 'I' and 'you', 'you' and 'me' but only with the gift of grace that Christ gives us.

Today, 4th October is the day that the Church marks the commemoration of one of the most highly regarded of all saints, St Francis. It's particularly special this year because today marks the 800th anniversary of Francis' death. Francis is an important saint for this cathedral community, and I know that many of you have an affection for his life and witness.

Francis was born in around 1181, son of a rising middle-class merchant who had more than enough excitement in his youth – he went to war, dressed himself in glamorous armour and had ambitions as a chivalrous knight; he was captured and spent a year imprisoned by the winning side in anticipation of a fulsome ransom! Early in life he renounced his family riches, began to beg for a living and sought solidarity with the poor. He attracted many followers including women who made their home with St Clare.

I was struck this week by a discussion on the BBC Radio Four programme Free Thinking that reflected on St Francis as a Christian who has a reach and impact well beyond the walls of the institutional church. The discussion was framed by the current round of party-political conferences, as each main party gathers to set out their vision for the future.

With the complexities of artificial intelligence firmly on our agenda do we need to turn to Francis in search of a new simplicity in the way we see the future and prepare ourselves for it? As money began to flow in the merchant families and businesses of northern Italy in the thirteenth century how far was Francis' rejection of wealth and possessions a timely moment, a protest in the history of Christianity's relationship with the market economy?

At the centre of the conversation was Francis the first environmentalist and the discussion explored the contemporary idea of 'integral ecology', behind which lies Francis' thinking and practice as a disciple of Jesus. Integral ecology, made well known by the previous Pope who took Francis' name, recognises that as human beings we have three fundamental spheres of relationship that intertwine with each other and which we can never step out of: the sphere of each other, our inter human relationships; our relationship with the natural order including the animal world; and our relationship with the transcendent, in Christian terms the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. Our place in the world, the actions we take and the commitments we make and act out must take account of all our relationships without which we lose the wholeness of God's salvation for God's creation and impoverish our understanding of what it is to follow Jesus.

There is no doubt integral ecology is making a difference to how people think and act in both the church and outside. The intriguing question lies in the growth of Eco spiritualities and how they will connect or not connect with the Christian view of creation. It's an open-ended question about

how St Francis' teaching will continue to spread – but that is exactly why the sort of public debate, represented by Free Thinking is so important.

When St Francis heard the call of God to a life of poverty and solidarity with the poor, he was in the ruins of the Church of St Damiano. From the crucifix still hanging in the channel God appeared to speak, Francis, he said, 'build, repair my church'. Now, that must have meant at first glance the rebuilding of the ruin in which Francis was sheltering with his companions. More deeply it meant 'repair my church in the world, in its brokenness rebuild the global church', and this brings us back to our three words – 'stone', 'zeal' and 'you'.

Francis was called to repair God's church brought into being by the death and resurrection of Christ. His call came from the one who died and rose again to bring into being a refreshed people of God. Francis' call was to refresh the people of God by recalling the church back to the stone on which the people of God are anchored, the crucified one, the one who was rejected and treated as of no account in this world.

Francis sought to repair the church by offering a sign to the church in his own life shaped by the death and resurrection of Jesus – rejecting possession, becoming poor, setting up a community that would witness both to the church in its own life and to the world. Francis lived for Christ. 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of this suffering by becoming like him in his death'. Words of St Paul but which could have been written by Francis. Words that communicate the zeal for Christ that both Paul and Francis felt and which we aspire to have in our own lives.

Francis took responsibility for his own life and the way he responded to Christ's claim on his life. Francis knew the force of the word 'you' - in its individual, personal sense – to live out the law of God every day with confidence in the grace of Christ who day by day in the face of failure, offers forgiveness and a new start.

May we also know that sense of moral responsibility in our following of Christ. May we be caught up in the life of God's new community with a zeal that puts Christ at the heart of our very being and resolve to allow God's grace to work in us in the way we live our lives.

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