

St Francis and the Politics of Non-Violence

A reflection for Easter

Fools to the world, we know the wisdom of God.

In the six months since the attacks of September 11th, while the conflict drags on in Afghanistan, violence flares in the Middle East and unspecific threats are made towards Iraq, Christians struggle to find a place to stand, to know what to make of the "war on terror" and how to act towards those accused of terrorism and violence. But it is not as if our tradition offered no guidance here.

One unlikely story concerns Saint Francis of Assisi. One of the more intriguing episodes in his life tells of his visit to Malik-al-Kamil, Sultan of Egypt, in 1219 during the fifth Crusade. It is such an unlikely story that there can be no doubt of its authenticity: and yet it begs so many questions. And the issues it raises are uncannily pertinent to our post-September 11th world.

First, the story: Francis, having set his heart on speaking directly to the Sultan, and gaining no official recognition for this enterprise either from the Pope's representative or the Allied commanders, nevertheless set off, with one other friar as companion, to cross from Damietta into enemy lines. As they entered the Sultan's territory they were seized and roughly treated but managed somehow to get themselves taken on to see the Sultan himself. He received them courteously, treated them well, listened attentively to and disputed with Francis, pressed gifts upon him and invited him to stay. Perhaps, as the story goes, he was inclined, by Francis' example, towards Christianity. Perhaps not. Conversion for him was not really an option. Francis refused the gifts (all but a muezzin horn) wishing to stay only if his preaching mission might continue. The Sultan regretfully sent them away with safe conduct, back to their own camp. The expedition seem to have made little, if any, impression on the Crusaders, or directly on the course of the war.

What are we to make of all this? Why did Francis so earnestly desire to go on this unlikely enterprise? What outcome did he expect? There is little help from contemporary or later commentators here, who simply record the incident without explanation. Since the disastrous martial adventures of his youth (he was captured in a border clash between Assisi and Perugia and spent a year in a Perugian prison) he had clearly not seen war as a solution to difficulties and differences;

in several situations in the political and religious complexities of his time, he is portrayed in the role of mediator. But here he seems to be almost sidestepping the war, intent instead on a sort of "parallel offensive" of missionary conversion. And this was to be achieved not by violence but by a non-violent engagement, relying on the power of argument and example.

Though this event had no obvious effect on the course of the war, it does appear to have had unforeseen consequences: the Friars henceforth traveled freely in the Muslim world; the Sultan is recorded as treating Christian prisoners with unparalleled kindness. And Francis' own faith and vision can be seen to have been broadened and enhanced by his encounter with the "enemy".

Secondly, this event is to be judged in the light of Francis' singular devotion to reflecting as far as possible the life and teaching of Jesus. So here two notable things happen: there is the encounter with the other, the outcast, the unbeliever, who, as so often in the Gospels, is revealed as being not after all so different and certainly not excluded from the circle of God's love. But most importantly all this takes place without resort to violence, though not by capitulation. Jesus simply did not resort to violence, not even ultimately in self defence. It was not that he did not attempt to counter evil, but that he did not counter it with its own methods, with violence. These lessons would not have been lost on Francis, more and more inclined to follow and apply the clear message of the Gospels, however unlikely and out-of-step with contemporary thinking that might be.

It is a lesson which should not be lost on us either, given the striking parallels with current events. Perhaps it is not surprising that the recent day of prayer for peace took place at Assisi and the resulting Decalogue for Peace contains a message very like Francis'. For it is the message of Easter.

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(*First published in Franciscan Angles 2002*)

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