

ST MARY'S IFFLEY
Proper 9 Year C Principal Service
4 July 2010

*Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals;
and greet no one on the road.*

Extraordinary words!

Greet no one on the road.

Greetings in that part of the world were and still are long! Never just a simple "Hi there", but kissings and asking after all the members of your family and asking for God's blessing on your flocks and herds – an elaborate affair that could go on for some time. But for Jesus the time is short, the task urgent so greet no one on the road. A disastrous command to follow as the vicar of Iffley! But in the context of Jesus' ministry, when he had set his face to go to Jerusalem and matters were pressing, an understandable command – greet no one on the road.

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.

Our car has never got into our garage and I'm now beginning to find it difficult to get my bike in! I'm sure none of you are as bad as we are – your cupboards sorted, attics empty, nothing under the beds! Each time we've moved parish we've felt the Lord sending us, moving us on, asking us to take another step on our Christian journey – and each time the lorry needed to love us has got bigger and bigger!

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.

Jesus told his followers – travel light, be vulnerable, keep your eyes focused on the task, trust.

The first person who wanted to join Saint Francis of Assisi was a man called Bernard. He was a magistrate in the city of Assisi, held in high regard and the owner of a handsome palazzo. He was intrigued by Francis, wasn't sure that he was genuine so invited Francis to spend a night with him in his palace. The event which moved Bernard most was not so much the answers that Francis gave to his questions, but what Bernard saw him do during the night. As soon as Francis thought Bernard was asleep, he got up and spent the whole night in prayer, saying out loud, over and over again, some very simple words:

My God and my All.

The next morning this wealthy, influential man said he wanted to join Francis. Francis felt very uncertain and decided to rest the matter with the scriptures. Together they went to the nearby parish church along with

a third man, Peter. After praying for a while Francis opened the Gospels and read the first words he saw:

*Go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor,
and you will have treasure in heaven.*

A second time Francis opened the Gospels:

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.

A third time the Gospels were opened:

*If any want to become my followers, let them deny
themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

The Franciscan way started! Bernard stood outside his house and simply distributed everything he had to anyone who cared to take them. The poor of Assisi, honest and dishonest, carried away his furniture and the contents of his house; the more respectable looked on astonished; Francis was elated! And these words of Jesus formed part of the Rule of Life for Francis and his companions:

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. We carry so much!

Simplicity though is not so much about external things like purses, bags and sandals, but an interior disposition, the attitude of mind with which we live. I'm sure we each have our bathroom cabinets stuffed with all sorts of things – shampoo, perfume, vitamins, out of date prescriptions – you name it we've got it! Or perhaps for us it's our under stairs cupboard, garage or loft! But whatever it is, we need to think of simplicity not so much in terms of external objects but inner freedom. And if that's the case we need to be missionaries to our own hearts. We're sent out –yes; sent on – yes; but also sent within:

*Go on your way, Jesus said. "See, I am sending you like lambs into the
midst of wolves."*

Perhaps it's the fears within that make us carry so much without?

We carry so much as a church too!

An understanding of the church that I have found invaluable has been a very simple classification; it has been suggested that there are three threads which are woven together to make up the life of the church – the institutional, the theological and the mystical.

The institutional thread is about buildings and finance, insurance and canon law. We talk about 'supporting the church', we try and encourage others to 'come to church', we think of the church as a 'good thing' which has a place in society and we are glad to be part of it. There are though two other threads that are woven together to make up the life of the

church, the theological and the mystical, each more important than the institutional.

The theological thread is about creeds and beliefs, trying to use words to express the Christian faith. Theology is about the head – what sense does it make to call Jesus Christ the Son of God – what are we doing when we break bread together – who was Luke who wrote the Gospel we've heard read? Study courses and sermons, house groups and books are all about this and it's important.

However von Hugel who suggested this threefold classification for the life of the church believed that of the three it is the mystical thread running through the life of the church that is the most important and fundamental. It's the hidden bond of love between us and our God; it's the spirit of Christ dwelling in our hearts and shared with others. For this we need no purse, no bag, no sandals; indeed we may have to leave much institutional baggage behind; and that can be challenging since so much of our faith is bound up with the institution.

We discussed this at our last PCC meeting.

One of the points made was that because there is no longer the general support for the life of the church coming from the wider society, belonging to a church is now much more the result of a personal decision rather than because it's the 'done thing to do'. We are forced to ask ourselves why we are in the church? And there is a sifting in that. We have to dig deeper, travel lighter, carry our spiritual resources within us and between us much more and depend less on the institution of the church to do the theological and mystical work for us.

And most if not all members of the PCC felt this was a very positive development.

What was it that persuaded Bernard to throw in his lot with Francis?

Was it the many little churches that Francis repaired with his own hands in and around Assisi?

Was it the answers that Francis gave to all the questions Bernard put to him over supper?

Or was it watching Francis all night in prayer, saying these simple words out loud over and over again?

My God and my All.

We do need to be missionaries to our own hearts; that task is as urgent now as it was for his disciples when Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem:
Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; greet no one on the road, Jesus told them,
but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.