

## Alnmouth study week October 2011

### Francis and stories

Caroline Ugbo

*This is an exploration of the value of stories in our Franciscan life.*

Where do stories come from? One day scientists may come close to finding out how the world began, but no one will ever find out who told the first story. Not all facts are available for discovery.

We often ask if something is true, meaning is the statement upheld by the facts, but there are truths beyond facts. We are humans not machines and there are truths embedded in stories even those, which are recognizably full of lies and exaggerations. The teller is always part of the story.

When I lived in West Africa I had a book by Ulli Beier who collected creation stories from different tribal groups; they were all different but had in common three elements, man, earth and the gods, the unknown. Each one is an attempt to grasp at mystery and give it form.

The *griots* of West Africa were poets who recited history for the people to give them an understanding of their common origin and reason to work together, much as the *skalds* of the Norsemen. Interestingly, so many 'national' stories are about individuals who uphold the honour of the community's way of life.

In the West we are brought up on Greek and Roman myths if we have a classical education, and stories from the Bible if we have a religious education. There are also our national heroes, King Arthur and Robin Hood; others remain only as misty figures found in old documents, Beowulf and the like.

Then there are Aesop's fables which are moral stories clothed in figures outside our everyday world. This distancing helps to focus on the purpose rather than the participants. Yet when the prophet Nathan wants to make a moral point to King David, he tells a story of a lamb that will ring true in the king's own experience, this is a private not a public example. Stories also belong to the audience.

Many of the Old Testament prophets paint pictures of the future, which are almost stories, the roads being made straight, the dry lands being full of water, but some are asked by God to make a story with action. Ezekiel breaks through walls and is bound, spending so much time on his left side and on his right. Jeremiah breaks pots and buys fields to illustrate God's purpose for his people.

When Jesus tells his stories he chooses the simple things his listeners will understand from the farmers sowing their seed to the housewife baking bread. Some of the stories are based on traditional stories doing the rounds; he just

dresses them differently for new emphasis. Each story leaves a picture in our minds, which can be referenced to our every day life if we choose. The homeless man sitting in the street waiting for money to be put in his cap is also the man 'fallen among thieves'.

That is stretching the story through time, but stories also change across cultures. In the West we have in the Stations of the Cross Veronica (true icon) wiping Jesus' face on his way to Calvary, in the East we have the sick King of Edessa receiving the imprint of Jesus' face on a cloth to cure him, which becomes the basis of the Mandylion (made without hands) icon of the Orthodox Church. Neither of these stories appears in the gospels, so are they true, or are they only bearers of the truth? Both are stories of compassion, one on the part of Veronica and the other on the part of Jesus, and both create a picture in our mind.

The gospels themselves are amazing documents, quite unique in their time, we are told, and for Christians unique for all time. They are a stringing together of stories about one man, major stories and minor stories, so that we in the future might meet him as closely as possible. There was a book, 'The Bible as History', which sat on my shelf for many years and was read and re read in the family. It was an account of how archaeology and other historical discoveries could authenticate parts of the Jewish history contained in the Old Testament, and this, by association, gives a certain level of credence to the rest. For the Gospels we have Roman remains, *tells* which have been dug up to reveal towns, and the Pavement where Jesus stood before Pilate, but the Word made flesh is only alive to us in the stories.

Here I would bring in Francis. As a novice I was among those told by our Area Novice Guardian not to forget the stories, and as the years pass, of all the things that I was advised, this is the one that remains most constantly in my mind.

Apart from a children's book about Francis from a series about the saints, my first introduction to him was GK Chesterton's 'St Francis of Assisi'. The copy I had access to was an illustrated edition, given to my mother for Christmas 1926. It is not a life of Francis as written by Celano, Bonaventure or Sabatier, but more an exploration by one man of what the life of this man meant to the writer and maybe means to others. Here I want to quote from what he wrote in a chapter entitled The Mirror of Christ:

*'...if men find certain riddles and hard sayings in the story of Galilee, and if they find the answers to those riddles in the story of Assisi.....It shows that the casket that was locked in Palestine can be unlocked in Umbria;...'*

The language is not such as we would use today, but the very accumulation of stories about this man Francis gives us the opportunity to see a fallible human being attempting to live a gospel life, gives us the highs and the lows of such an attempt. The stories, which mark the important turning points in Francis life, are included in the Lives of Celano and Bonaventure, those who got them from his companions collected others afterwards.

Sometimes a person is described as a good man or good woman, and the question arises in your mind as to how or why this is so. To illustrate this 'goodness' a story is told of what they have done to show their good qualities. Then the listener supposedly has proof of the speaker's opinion. In the stories of Francis we have so many to show us different facets of the man he was and the effect he had on the brothers who followed him.

Francis was gifted from birth with the ability to lead others. He loved song and fun and laughter, so when he asks Masseo to spin round like a top to decide which road they should take, what in another might seem madness was in him acting according to his natural high spirits.

Of course, this confidence in telling others what to do and have them obey was badly used when he asked Rufino to go and preach in his breeches from the pulpit in Assisi. Francis is soon aware that he has misused his authority and rushes after him to do exactly what he had told Rufino to do, and what looks like a jape is made into an opportunity for Francis to speak with great power so those who heard him *'were converted to a new state of mind'*.

Ever impulsive when asked to rebuild the church he starts to look for stones to shore up St Damiano. Later he comes back for a chapter at the Portiuncula and, thinking his brothers are building themselves a place to stay, against the principles by which they are supposed to be living, he climbs on the roof and starts throwing the roofing materials down. He has to be stopped because it is the people of Assisi who are building for the brothers.

When he wanted to rebuild St Damiano, he sells his father's cloth and horse to give money to the priest for the project (the priest wisely doesn't take the money being only too aware of the nature of Francis and his father). Later having nothing to give a poor man he asks his companion to give his own cloak. He is as free with other's property as his own.

But when he finds a young brother groaning in the night for hunger he gets up and eats with him, breaking his own fast. The person is more important than the rule.

And that brings us to Francis' learned behaviour. He loved song and chivalry, he was a young man of his age, enchanted by daring deeds and fealty to a lord, courtly love to fair ladies, and it informed his attitudes to the world around him. 'Would you not rather serve the master than the servant?' he was asked in a dream of a great hall with shields on the wall. Lady Poverty was the lady he would serve to his dying day. Approaching the Sultan was the action of a knight, even if without a sword, one didn't quail in the face of danger. Like Chaucer's knight, *'he loved chivalrye, trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisye.'*

Once he had gone into the service of the Lord, his courtesy extended to everything in the world, the lepers, brother wolf, the birds to whom he

preached, Lady Clare, and out of that courtesy comes the '*chanson*', the Song of the Creatures.

Here was a man whose nature and nurture, all that he was, were offered unconditionally to the Lord. We feel that we know him, that we have sat down with his brothers round the fire one evening and heard the stories, those that bring smiles and laughter, and those that challenge our own commitment.

Then there are the stories of Brother Juniper, who takes everything literally and cuts the bells off the altar frontal to give a poor woman when he is left to keep watch, who when he is cook for two weeks cooks everything the first night (without benefit of a fridge). Exaggeration can put the breaks on our excesses and remind us to laugh at ourselves and at any of our aims that are unreal.

Sometimes we go to the elderly and they will tell us that things weren't like this in their day, and the world would be better if things were run according to the principles they espouse, and we wait to be bored and internally grumpy, but if they start to tell us stories about their times down the mines or in service, the fun things and the scary ones, we don't mind how often we are told, because they put themselves in front of us, their lived lives not their theories.

There are also the stories that don't sit so comfortably with our rational minds, stories of telepathy, of shining visions, prophecies in prayer. Through Francis had been created Pentecostal times, a group of people transfigured by love despite the daily hardships. They lived for a time on the crest of a wave and saw through to that other bright world that is both without and within us, if we only have eyes to see. There came a time Francis saw the community fire going out, the order was changing, but some still carried the flame. La Verna was still to come. We pray, '*Inflame our hearts by the fire of your love*'. We are still asking for that passion, compassion and vision as we follow Francis on the roads of Umbria and beyond.

Long before I became a Franciscan Tertiary I used to keep a copy of the Everyman 'Little Flowers of S. Francis' in the glove compartment of my car. The volume also contained S. Bonaventure's Life. Now the Life I might read at home, but the stories were read in Nigerian rainy season traffic jams (locally called 'go-slows', but actually dead stops) and sitting outside school when collecting the children, if I got there too early. They were like cookies I could nibble at. And if I live long enough for my grey cells to pack up almost totally, I think Franciscan joy will still remain when I remember Francis dancing down the road playing an imaginary violin with two sticks, when The Principles may be just words without meaning.