Introduction
Hello, and welcome to this podcast from Christ Church Cathedral. My name is Sarah Foot. I'm one of the canons. You're going to hear a reading, one of those that the lectionary prescribes for matins for today and then a sermon in which I'll reflect on the resonances of this passage for the life of St Francis of Assisi whose feast falls on 4 October. Finally, I'll end with some prayers, concluding with the Lord's Prayer and the Grace, in which I hope you'll join me from wherever you're listening.

Luke 12:1-12
Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered in thousands, so that they trampled on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, ‘Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops.

‘I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

‘And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to
defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.’

Here ends the reading.

**Sermon**

On the night of the 3rd October in the year 1226 Francis of Assisi, founder of the order of Friars Minor died. Had this been a weekday, not a Sunday, we would have kept his festival today, 4th October. I want to use this podcast to reflect on one aspect of Francis’s charism – his exceptional capacity to relate to the natural world, especially his love of birds – in the light of that passage from Luke’s gospel which you have just heard. ‘Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.’

When I re-read this passage I immediately thought of the saint, for Francis’ interest in birds is one of the most well-known things about him. It brought to mind the famous Giotto fresco of Francis preaching to the birds, one of the 28 illustrations of the life of Francis made by the celebrated late thirteenth-century painter for the upper church of San Francesco in Assisi.

The picture illustrates a story told in all the versions of the life of Francis.

One day, when he was travelling with eight companions in the valley of Spoleto, Francis saw a great flock of birds of different species gathered together. Curious, he left the road and approached them, but they didn’t fly away, so ‘Francis was filled with joy and humbly begged them to listen to the word of God. Among the things he told them, he said the following: “My brothers the birds, you should love your creator deeply and praise him always. He has given you feathers to wear, wings to fly with, and whatever else you need. He has made you noble among his creatures and given you a dwelling in the pure air. You neither sow nor reap, yet he nevertheless protects and governs you without any anxiety on your part.” The attentive birds allowed the saint to walk among them, touching them with his tunic. Finally, he blessed them and, making the sign of the cross, gave them permission to fly off elsewhere.

The Franciscan friar whom Giotto depicted standing just behind the saint as he blessed the birds, plays an important role in emphasising just how extraordinary was the event that he had witnessed. Giotto gave him a surprised expression and represented him with his hand also raised; not, I think, to offer his own blessing but rather to reinforce his astonishment at what Francis had done.

The friar would of course have picked up the gospel reference in the words that apparently belonged to the saint’s sermon. Found in Matthew’s gospel in the Sermon on the Mount, and in Luke’s a little later in the same chapter from which our reading for today came, this is the well-known passage in which Jesus told his disciples to think of ravens and of lilies (in Matthew’s account: the birds of the air and the flowers of the field). He reminded them that although ravens don’t sow, or reap, or store food in barns, yet God feeds them and cares for them. The message that Francis supposedly drew for the birds was a simple one about gratitude. That they should be thankful to God for all the blessings he has bestowed on his creation and not worry that he would fail them or cause them to lack for anything.

The injunction not to worry is the same as that in our reading: do not be afraid. But Luke put into Jesus’ mouth words that are of distinctly more importance than those attributed to Francis. For Jesus made a crucial distinction between birds (and by implication the whole animal kingdom) and human beings. Let us go back to the passage that we heard earlier.

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? The exact sum for which the bird might be bought is irrelevant. Luke used a noun assarion that referred to the smallest denomination of copper coin in
circulation in his day, equivalent to roughly 1/16th of a denarius, the amount of money one would earn for a full day’s work. What he meant to convey was that sparrows (by which he meant not that specific species, but any type of very small bird sold in markets to the poor for food) could be bought extremely cheaply, using this analogy to stress God’s providence. Everything in the world depends on God’s will. The smallest of birds; and – even smaller and more insignificant – the hairs on your head. So, do not be afraid. If God will pay attention to things of such little worth, how much more can we be reassured that he will care for us, his people.

We need to read the reference to sparrows in the context of the passage as a whole, which addresses various issues that his disciples would encounter in their future ministry and urges them to show courage in times of danger, putting their trust in God. In Luke’s gospel, this comes just after an occasion when Jesus had attacked the Pharisees and lawyers, accusing them of harbouring malice against prophets and apostles. The previous chapter ended with his opponents lying in wait in the hope of ensnaring him.

Psychologically, this was thus a good time at which to address his disciples’ anxiety: their fear at the prospect of arrest, persecution and probable death. So, Jesus changed his tone. Instead of criticising the behaviour of his opponents, he started offering positive exhortation to avoid the hypocrisy that characterised the Pharisees. He went on to confront the disciples’ fears head on by contrasting their – real and entirely understandable – fear of what their enemies would do to them with a much more appropriate, and eschatological fear. Rather than worrying about what any humans might do to the body, they should concern themselves with fear of him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. That is, God himself. He will ultimately mete out judgement on everyone, and that is something everyone should rightly fear.

Yet Jesus went on in Luke’s account (and in the version of the same speech in Matthew’s gospel) to balance the need to be afraid of what will happen at the end of time with the reminder that God cares for all parts of his creation, for tiny birds, even the hairs on our heads. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

We would be mistaken to see this comparison between humanity and tiny birds, or the later exhortation to learn from the birds and the flowers, as trivial, sentimental or about environmentalism. Luke does not deny that birds die, flowers fade, and grass withers. He is making a much deeper point about the special relationship between humanity and God, one that has particular relevance in the context of reflection on the life of Francis of Assisi, and on the ways that Francis’s legacy has the potential be misused.
After the first occasion on which Francis preached to the birds, his biographer reported that the saint felt himself negligent for not having preached to birds before. For he was struck by the reverence with which they had responded to the word of God. And so, ‘from that day on, he exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and even non-existent creatures, to praise and love the creator, for every day, when the name of the saviour was announced, he himself saw their obedience.’

Francis certainly had an exemplary attitude towards the natural world and the need to care for all of God’s creation; for the poor and the outcast, for the birds of the air and beasts of the field. He rejected the affluent life of his merchant father, and lived as a pilgrim, in simplicity and wonderful harmony with God, nature and with himself. Pope Francis (named for this saint of course) has described Francis as ‘the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically; …. he shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.’ Francis’ example reminds us that all creation forms a harmonious unity.

But we should not fall into the trap of arguing that we, humanity, are merely animals, still less – to quote John Gray’s Straw Dogs – a notably ‘rapacious species … not obviously worth preserving’.

In the harmonious unity of creation, humanity stands apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. Together with all animals, we have consciousness. But we also have conscience. Unlike animals, we have the capacity to reflect on our actions, the rational power to reflect on the consequences of what we have done. Many have argued that our consciences are God-given. For we are made in the image and likeness of God. And made by God to have a relationship with him not just in life but after death. Humans – unlike animals – have an eternal destiny.

That is the central message that we should take from Jesus’ use of imagery about birds (and flowers). They die, fade and wither away. But because of our particular destiny, our existence here on earth is not the only one. While fear of judgement is rational (and fitting) – what we do now here on earth will have consequences in the future – Jesus offers much comfort here as well. To remind us that the hairs of our head are all counted is to remind us, as St Jerome wrote, not only that nothing of ours is hidden from God, but of God’s boundless providence and generosity towards humanity. Quoting Jerome again, ‘these little creations fall not without God’s superintendence and providence, and if things made to perish, perish not without God’s will, you who are immortal ought not to fear that you live without His providence.’
The example of St Francis, whose feast falls on this date, reminds us of the intimate relationship we have with all of creation, with all who share our common home. He is the patron saint of ecology. That humanity has harmed the planet cannot be doubted: the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of parts of the environment have had and are having terrible consequences that affect all species. We have an obligation to pay more attention to and take more care of the natural world; to try to live in harmony with nature, not by exploiting it for our own needs. But to show love for, and to be attentive to, the needs of birds and animals (of flowers and forests) is not to argue that we should equate ourselves with animals. We, made in the image of God, and given by him the capacity to reason, to distinguish right from wrong and to express contrition for our sins, should have the confidence to put our trust in God, and in his infinite and unbounded mercy. We are in God’s sight, or more value than many sparrows. And God who is faithful will not let us fall.

**Intercessions**

Let us pray

> O God, you ever delight to reveal yourself
> in the childlike and lowly of heart:
> Grant that, following the example of the blessed Francis,
> We may count the wisdom of this world as foolishness
> and know only Christ Jesus, and him crucified
> who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen

A prayer of St Francis of Assisi

> O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
> to be consoled as to console.
> to be understood as to understand
> to be loved as to love;
> for it is in giving that we receive,
> it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
> and it is in dying that we are born,
> to eternal life
> trusting in Jesus Christ, our saviour and our redeemer. Amen
As we remember Francis’ care for the natural world, his love for the birds of the air, we pray that we may follow his example and be more attentive to the earth which sustains us and to all those with whom we share its resources, that we may live up to our responsibilities to care for Creation.

Creator God
you made all things
and all you made was very good.
Show us how to respect
the fragile balance of life.
Guide by your wisdom those who have power
to care for or destroy the environment,
that by the decisions they make
life may be cherished
and a good and fruitful earth
be preserved for future generations;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory
for ever and ever. Amen.

We gather all these our prayers together in the words of the grace

The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, ever more. Amen.