

St Francis of Assisi – October 4th



St Francis of Assisi is one of the best known and most cherished of all the saints. Everyone knows him as a lover of animals and the natural world, and many children's books show him preaching to animals. But there is much more to him than that.

Francis was born around 1182, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. Until the age of 20 he lived the life of pleasure usual for a young man of his position. He was, however, greatly affected when on a pilgrimage to Rome by the beggars he saw there, and a day he spent himself begging for alms. On his return to Assisi, he felt called by God to restore the ruined Church of S. Damiano. This he did, raising the finances by selling a bale of his father's cloth. His father was not pleased and disinherited him. Francis embraced a life of poverty, ministering to lepers and continuing to rebuild the church.

His true importance lies, however, in the Order of friars he founded, the Franciscans or Friars Minor. The Order was originally committed to absolute poverty both for its members and for the Order itself. The Order proved very popular and increased rapidly and went on wider and wider missions, although the rule of absolute poverty proved unsustainable for a large organisation, and various interpretations led to disputes and schisms in the order over the years. None the less the Franciscans continued to fill an important role of mission and of preaching the Gospel to the poor. The emphasis on preaching to the poor and illiterate made the Franciscans great supporters of artists: the largest Franciscan Church, Santa Croce in Florence, contains many fine works, by Giotto and Donatello and many others.



Francis himself realised that he was not blessed with administrative gifts and he was happy to relinquish the leadership of the Order to others. He spent his last years in retreat on Mt Alvernia, and it was there that he is said to have received the *stigmata*, the five wounds of Christ appearing on his own body, as a mark of his own devotion and of God's favour. Francis is the first saint said to have received these marks, and when not depicted with animals, he is usually shown receiving, or displaying, the stigmata.

Francis is known as man of generosity and simple devotion to God and man, and of course, great love for all created things.