

FIRST TEACHING

*Jesus Christ is the Fullness of the
Incarnation of God*

HIS FATHER PIETRO WAS AWAY FOR MANY months at a time when Francis was a boy. He would be in France buying cloth, and Francis would wait. He would go out to the city gate of San Giacomo and play with his friends there. But that was only a ruse. He was really there in that quarter of the city hoping he would see his father and his retinue riding toward Assisi, the mules loaded down with bolts of cloth. The waiting was long but he had learned to wait because his father would always return.

But this was different. He was in prison, a dungeon deep inside a cliff of rock in Perugia. He'd been here for months. He kept waiting while he worked like a slave hauling stones. But his father never came. Day after day after day. The seasons had changed twice before he realized he was no longer waiting. Something had happened to him. He knew his father would not come. Like God, his father had abandoned him to his own fate.

He began to have nightmares, and in the dreams he would be playing outside the Porta San Giacomo in Assisi, waiting for his

father. Then suddenly he would see him in the distance, and he would begin to wave and yell, “Papa, Papa,” and the keepers of the gate would start to open the great wooden doors, and Francis would be jumping for joy hardly able to restrain himself from squeezing through the opening when it was just beginning to slowly inch open. And then he would finally fit into the opening in the doors, and he’d wiggle through with the gate keepers laughing and threatening him, saying they were going to drop the portcullis on him. But he would break free just in time, and begin running toward the horses and the men hailing him, and then he would speed up in one final burst of energy reaching out to a sudden awakening: he was screaming in the dark of the prison, his friends trying to calm him. “Calma, Francesco, it’s okay; it is only a dream!” And he would then slump back against the cold stone, knowing he was still trapped. There was no way out.

And so they began, the terrible nights: the shaking, the need to keep his back to the wall so he could see whoever might be advancing toward him to harm him. He became obsessively on his guard. He was no longer safe. God and his father no longer existed. At least they did not exist for him. They were distance, indifference, dismissal. He was alone, though his fellow prisoners were all around him. When would they, too, turn away or, worse, turn on him? He had to be vigilant day and night.

His only consolation was to retreat into reverie and connect to his former passion for knighthood. He would picture himself victorious, the great knight he would have become had he not been captured and put in prison. He had to keep alive the knightly ideal and code. He began to live in his mind and imagination. His imagination would show him how not to be defeated by giving him hope that all of this would change. He could see it in

his mind's eye. And this made him joyful. He began to encourage his fellow prisoners. He had hope again because he could once more imagine that someday there would be a castle, a lady, a Round Table. King Arthur would find him and Arthur would replace his father and his absent God.

This imagined scene from Francis's time in prison sets the scene for his first teaching, namely, that the seemingly absent Father-God sent his son to live among us to be the tangible presence of God, a God who could be imagined because he was a human being like us, and his name was Jesus and he lived in Palestine over a thousand years before Francis was born. And Francis met him when he most needed to know God's presence to him, to know God's face. And it all happened when he was finally released from prison in Perugia and returned to Assisi a broken man. Let us imagine that scene:

And then he was released and told he was free; he could go home. He stood there motionless, the Umbrian sun blinding and hurting his eyes, which had become accustomed to darkness. He took a few halting steps and fell at the feet of the two servants his father had sent to him. They lifted him to his feet as if he were a light and empty sack, and the older one said, "Everyone is waiting for you, Francesco, everyone, especially your father Pietro, and Donna Pica, your mother. They love you and are bursting with happiness that you are at last freed from prison and will again bring light to the family home."

"And where is home?" Francis asked. "No one sought me out, no one tried to free me. I have no home; I have a house. And I will return to my father's house."

The men gave each other knowing looks. This was not like Francesco. Something bad, this terrible place, had changed him.

“It will be okay, Francesco. You just need to rest. You need time,” the younger man said. “You’ve had a terrible experience. Did they torture you?”

“No. But the chains did, and the dark. I was in the dark much of the time. And my fellow prisoners made it worse with their curses, their moaning, their crying out in the night. I tried to cheer them. I sang for them. I encouraged them to keep hoping. But no one from Assisi came for us.”

They were walking now, slowly, stumbling toward two horses tied nearby. It seemed too far to Francis, an impossible journey. But with the help of the steady arms of his escorts, he made it to the horse he recognized as one of his favorite mounts before he’d gone to war. And the young mare, a white palfrey, recognized the young rider and began neighing and shaking her head.

He placed a shaking hand on the horse’s neck, and the older man hoisted him onto the horse, then he mounted, as well, asking Francis to hold onto his waist. The younger man mounted the other horse and led the way, the three of them trotting slowly toward the town of Collestrada near Ponte San Giovanni on the same road that Francis walked with fellow Assisian soldiers the day, a year earlier, when they were taken prisoner by Perugian soldiers. He who had fancied himself a knight was forced to walk horseless and in defeat to what he thought would be death. And it was in a way much like death, that dark imprisonment.

And now he had emerged from that tomb and was going to a place that seemed foreign and threatening. He would have to act like his old self, and he knew he would not be able to do it. He only wanted to close his eyes and sleep.

And that is how he finally arrived again in Assisi, his mother and father laughing and weeping at the same time. And he could

not respond, except to ask to be taken to his bed. He asked that the shutters be closed. He would, he said, be better in the morning.

But he wasn't better. He felt worse. It must have been the seventeen miles on horseback, he thought. He only wanted to sleep, and so he did. Sleep and have nightmares and fever. He could taste his fear each morning, despite his mother's loving care and his father's unusual patience as he waited for his former son to emerge from his room alive and well, full of his old enthusiasm and cheerfulness. He checked on Francis often, and Lady Pica brought him food, cleaned and aired out the room. But Francis could not interact with them, except to thank them and ask that they let him rest. And the days dragged on, week after week, month after month, until at last he woke to a morning without fear, without, in fact, any feeling at all.

He sensed something had finally changed, and he wanted to get up, to leave this cave of a room. He walked to the window as if he were just learning to walk. He gently pushed open the shutters and looked hopefully over the sunlit tiles of the city. But he felt nothing. There was no joy, no sense of wonder and awe as before when he'd wake full of anticipation of a new day, eager for adventure. Now he could only dully scan the vista and mechanically walk downstairs to where his parents waited hopefully, their forced smiles trying to rouse Francis from his torpor.

He kissed them without emotion and asked if might ride one of his father's palfreys through the countryside. It was as if he were asking his hosts if he could borrow one of their horses.

His father enthusiastically embraced his son. "*Si, si, Francesco!* Take your pick. They are all yours. Ride, Francesco, ride!"

And so he did, day after day after day. He grew stronger. But there was no joy. Perhaps if he got back on a warhorse again.