

Readings for Today: *Galatians 6: 14 – 18; Psalm 15 (16); Matthew 11: 25 – 30.*

In 1181 the son of a wealthy cloth-merchant of Assisi was baptized Giovanni, but when his father returned from France he called his son Francesco – “frenchman”. As a young man he helped his father in the business and played a large part in the social life of his city. While fighting for Assisi against Perugia he was captured and imprisoned for a year, during which time he was seriously ill. On his release he returned home and began to live a more serious life, concerned for the needy. When he was about twenty-five he was praying in the semi-ruined church of San Damiano outside the city when he heard a voice, which seemed to come from the crucifix, telling him three times “Francis, go and repair my church, which you see is falling down”. Taking the words literally, Francis sold some of his father’s cloth and bought materials to repair the church. This led to a row with his father, which ended with Francis renouncing his inheritance and laying all his clothes at his father’s feet. The bishop provided him with simple garments, and he began a life seeking the crucified Jesus, and totally identifying himself with the poor and the sick.

After two or three years seven disciples joined him, and they lived a communal life at the *Portiuncula* (Little Portion) outside Assisi. They began to go on preaching tours, supporting themselves by begging. By 1210 their number had increased greatly, and a simple Rule was approved at Rome, naming them *Friars Minor* – Lesser Brothers. They were to own nothing individually and lived in great poverty.

By 1220 there were some 5000 friars, and more organization was needed than Francis was able to provide, and he handed over his office of Minister-General to Brother Elias. A revised Rule of 1223 made compromises with Francis’s vision of poverty in identification with the Poor Jesus. For the remaining years of his life Francis held no office in the Order he had founded, but he continued to influence its life. At Christmas 1223 he erected a crib “to make a memorial of that Child who was born in Bethlehem”. In the summer of 1224 at La Verna, high in the mountains, he had a vision in which he received the stigmata – the marks of the wounds of Christ.

After this he became increasingly ill, and his sufferings were increased by primitive eye surgery.

He died on the evening of 3rd October 1226 and was canonized two years later.