

In Advent the Seasonal Readings are preferred for public use; but the first reading suggested for today is worth private reflection: 1Corinthians 9: 16 – 19, 22 – 23.

Francis (known as 'The Apostle of the Indies') was born in the Basque country of northern Spain in AD 1506, the youngest of a large family. Between the ages of seventeen and twenty-eight he studied at the university of Paris. During this time he met Ignatius Loyola, another Spaniard, and with him became one of the seven who in 1534 vowed to serve God as 'spiritual soldiers', prepared to go wherever they were sent. In 1540 these seven became the first members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), under a rule approved by Pope Paul III.

On his thirty-fifth birthday Francis sailed for the East with two companions, as part of the convoy of a new Portuguese governor of the Indies. They arrived in Goa (a Portuguese possession from 1510 to 1961) after a voyage of thirteen months. There was a considerable Christian population, but Church life was poor, there was little preaching, and native Goans were badly treated by many of the nominally Catholic Europeans. Francis spent five months ministering to the sick, including lepers, to prisoners, children, and slaves.

He then moved to the Island of Minar, where the people had been baptized in the hope of obtaining Portuguese protection against Arab slave-traders, but knew little or nothing of the faith. It was from here that he wrote to the Society describing his labours and praying for help.

His experiences in these two settings were to shape his ministry for the rest of his life. He went to Travancore in Southern India, visiting the shrine of S. Thomas, 'the Apostle of India', and later to Cochin, a Portuguese Protectorate on the East Coast, and to the Spice Islands of the Indies.

In 1549 he sailed for Japan with five companions. He learnt Japanese and wrote a simple account of Christian teaching for those who wished to learn. The mission in Japan was very fruitful.

Leaving it in the care of others, Francis returned to India, and continued his work, resolving difficulties with the Portuguese authorities, which he did firmly but with compassion.

His last journey was an unsuccessful attempt to reach mainland China. He was taken ill and died on 3rd December 1552. His relics were taken, first to Malacca and then to Goa, where they are still enshrined. He was canonized in 1662 at the same time as Ignatius Loyola.