

The wolf of Giorgio

A Christian Story about St. Francis of Assisi

Key Ideas: Christian teachings, care for animals, finding solutions

Deep in a wooded valley, in the mountains of northern Italy, there was a city called Giorgio. It was very beautiful. The people of Giorgio were intensely proud of their city. They wore a special red square on their jackets to tell the world that they were citizens of Giorgio. Often, strangers did not understand the sign and would ask its meaning. 'It means we are from Giorgio,' the people would say. You could hear the pride in their voices and see the haughtiness on their faces.

As dusk was falling, late one spring evening, a shadow slipped from the wooded slopes that circled the city. Unnoticed, it slunk into the cobbled alleys on the outskirts of the town, clinging close to the shadows of the walls, silent and watchful. After a time it found what it was looking for and pounced. Next morning, the people of Giorgio found the victim, a body broken and mangled, all its clothes torn to shreds. 'Who could do such a horrible deed?' they cried. All agreed it must have been a stranger. In the nights that followed no one walked the beautiful streets of Giorgio.

Then, one night, a month later a girl had to go out and visit her sick mother. She never arrived and the people found her body the next morning, broken and gnawed, the clothes torn to shreds, as before. A crowd, quickly, gathered. There was shock, panic even, in their voices. 'We cannot allow this to go on. We'll have to get rid of the strangers in the city.' But above the gabble of voices an old woman shouted, 'No, no I saw it all, I saw it all, I tell you'. A deep silence fell on the crowd. 'Last evening, I had just risen from my chair to go to bed when I heard footsteps outside in the alley. That's odd, I thought. It's so late. So I parted the curtains a little to see who it could be. In the same moment the shadow pounced, tearing at her throat. In the moonlight I could see what it was. No stranger. It was the long, grey hulk of a wolf, her blood splattered on his jaws.'

All that day, in the houses and streets and squares of Giorgio, the talk was of wolves. Maybe the old woman was seeing things. There seemed to be only one way to be sure. They must hunt out the wolf for themselves. Two young men agreed to take their swords and prowl the streets all night. If they found him, the wolf would certainly die. The people would praise their bravery and make sure that they received a good reward. All that night, the two men prowled the streets but the wolf found them before they found the wolf. The next morning there was double tragedy for Giorgio, again the broken bodies, the shredded garments.

The people crowded into the central square. They were angry and there was much shouting. 'Things have gone too far. Something must be done, today.' The mayor agreed. This was an emergency that only the army could deal with. But the merchants and the shopkeepers had no liking for that suggestion. 'If you call in the army,' they said, 'the word will go out, far and wide, that we have a wolf in Giorgio. Then no one will visit, there will be no trade and the city will empty and die. Though there was grumbling, the people soon saw that the objections of the merchants made sense.

Just then a young girl stood up to speak. She had heard that there was a holy man in the neighbouring town of Assisi. People there said that he could talk to animals. Giorgio should invite him to come and talk to the wolf and ask it to leave them in peace. The people howled with laughter. She was too young to understand that not even a very holy man could face a

ravenous wolf. But an old man, known in the city for his wisdom, told them that the child was right. He too had heard about the powers of this Francis and he might be able to help them. In any case, he had not heard anyone with a better idea.

So the people appointed a delegation to visit Assisi and invite Francis to come and speak to the wolf. It was also important that he make no mistake about their wishes for the animal. A proper holy man was sure to think that keeping the commandments was important. The holy man must tell the wolf to keep the commandments especially the two that said, 'Thou shalt not kill,' and, 'Love thy neighbour.' Others moaned that a wolf was a wolf and very unlikely to be too worried about any commandment. It would be far better if Francis gave him strict orders to leave Giorgio. He could go to Spoleto if he wished. After all, the people of Spoleto were so low, they deserved a wolf.

So the delegation went to Assisi. They had no trouble finding Francis. Their problem was to find him alone. It seemed like the whole of Italy wanted to see him and the delegation from Giorgio had no wish that news of the wolf in their city should ever be spread abroad. Eventually, they found a moment and told him of the wolf and the panic and slaughter in Giorgio. They implored him to come back with them and order the wolf to keep the commandments, to leave their forest and go to Spoleto if he had to find a place to go.

Francis listened to the story without a word. When it ended he told them to hurry home. He would pray and then decide what to do. . A few evenings later, a young man in a brown cloak stood on the edge of the forest on the outskirts of Giorgio. Slowly, he disappeared along a path that led into the heart of the forest. Now and then, the sharp crack of a twig alerted him to another presence, trailing him. As they reached the heart of the forest, Francis knew that he only had to stretch out his hand and would touch the wolf. He chose that moment to sit down. He raised his eyes to those other eyes that stared at him. 'Brother Wolf,' he said.

Early, next morning, news raced round Giorgio that the holy man was sitting by the fountain in the square. The whole town ran to the spot, curious to see him and anxious to hear him confirm that the wolf had left them and departed for Spoleto. The mayor raised his arms and called loudly for silence. Francis smiled and rose to speak. His message was brief. 'Sisters and Brothers, the answer to your problem is obvious,' he said. 'You must learn to feed your wolf.' The people gasped but Francis had nothing else to say.

That day, in all the homes and shops and streets of Giorgio there was anger. 'The brazen cheek of him,' they said. 'How dare he? Our wolf indeed. As if we would ask a wolf to join us. Doesn't he realise who we are - the citizens of noble Giorgio?'

That night, a shadow slunk along the alleys and streets of Giorgio again. It sloped across the squares and huddled, watchful, on street corners. Then a door opened and a shaft of light broke the darkness. A hand stretched out to place a plate of food on the pavement. The shadow inched towards the plate to gobble the food, hungrily. Then it raced from the street. Next evening, again, a shadow slunk from the woods. Again, it prowled the streets, tense and alert. Then a door opened and another plate of food rattled on the pavement. The people of Giorgio were feeding their wolf. Soon, news of the wolf spread throughout Italy and the people of Giorgio were delighted. Their city became even more famous. No other could boast a wolf that visited daily, ate their food and was never known to harm so much as a hair on a living thing.