

FRIENDS OF OUR LADY OF TINTERN

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NEWSLETTER MICHAELMAS 2009

Dear Friends

On 6th September the annual Sung Vespers - organized by the Friends since 2007 - was held at Tintern Abbey, and yet again not rained off, despite the weather forecasts. (That makes ten years of never having had to run for cover: how soon shall we make the record books?) The text of the homily preached then will be available on screen, if you have access, or can be sent to you on request. It was preached by Revd Norman Wallwork, Methodist minister and Ecumenical Prebendary of Wells Cathedral.

The following letter derives from reflections printed as an insert to the Order of Service on that day. Within it (and separately on our website) are details of a talk the Friends will be hosting in Monmouth on 14th November next, given by the internationally distinguished environmentalist Herbert Girardet. Since the 1980s he has written, made TV films and advised on development planning across the world, researching ways to meet the challenges of climate change and sustainable living. We expect a wide audience. Do come.

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO THE FUTURE

For some four-and-a-half centuries Vespers was not sung in Tintern Abbey. Since the 2000 Millennium its sound has risen again each year, though to the open skies. Over this decade the service itself has also opened out, spontaneously. Without ignoring the painful facts of our religious history, it has steadily built up a new store of joyful memories, celebrating this building, our Christian faith, and the lives of the monks and nuns and the whole "great cloud of witnesses" from whom we receive that precious heritage.

We rejoice in God and in the God-given world, but know that we constantly fail to treat our inheritance as we should. Shared worship can bring reconciliation. It also renews us in our determination to work together towards that better future called by Christ the kingdom. Mysteriously present in Him, but not yet with us in its fullness, this entails reshaping human life into ways of peace and justice, valuing and sharing every gift the Father bestows upon us.

The ecumenist theologian Paul McPartlan writes in moving terms of our relationship to Creation, reminding us that God's covenant of salvation with Noah and his descendants was made "with every living creature that is with you on the earth": a covenant in due time to be sealed in the life and death of Christ, "through whom all things were created" and in whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:15-17). The covenant, and the salvation that brings in the kingdom, are for the whole of Creation, as much as for humanity.

For all that, we humans do play a special role, in more than one sense. When we sin, we harm one another, but we are not the only ones to suffer. The whole Creation also suffers - "groans in travail" says St Paul - as it waits in agony for liberation from its bondage. And that cannot come until humankind attains its own specific destiny, truly to live as God's true children, not bound into the slavery that sin imposes on us. We have to acknowledge the full extent of our kinship with Creation and equally of our responsibility for its welfare.

How can we rescue the earth we have treated so badly? It is a hugely daunting task and we may not be personally able to do anything spectacular about it. Yet if we are so deeply interdependent that the quiver of a butterfly's wing can affect events on the other side of the globe, our smallest efforts may achieve a great deal. The prophet Micah defined the calling of us all as "walking humbly with God": living faithfully, employing justice, kindness and mercy toward every person (and creature), sharing scarce resources generously, putting up with any consequent privation cheerfully.

That must have been how the young Mary of Nazareth lived, until God offered her a vocation unique in its reach. At that moment she may have understood the promised Child as national Messiah, not yet as

universal Saviour. In any case, to accept meant risking total social rejection and becoming, on the human level, outcast. How did she dare to answer "Yes"? One reason, surely, is the accompanying message of reassurance, one that rings through the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation: "Fear not." From this she took courage, and so must we.

In Jesus' teaching the Father cares for every aspect of creation. Mary, as ever, mirrors her Son, "the image of the Father". Many people have drawn inspiration from her in making and sustaining authentic, loving relationship with God's creation - from its material elements such as buildings, wells or rivers, to human beings with all their varied needs of body, mind and spirit. For the Friends this fostering, nurturing role may stand out as the chief quality of Our Lady of Tintern and persuade us to see all our aims at the Abbey in that light.

The "butterfly effect" says we may well be able to create here a Centre that will benefit equally our local community and the wider world. The structural work being done on the cottage alongside the Abbey should be finished by July 2010. Given sufficient support and funding, we hope then to negotiate with Cadw terms for us to use it, and go on to fit out the interior and attract volunteer staff. The aim is to have a multi-purpose spiritual and practical resource, for individuals and for groups – perhaps sharing use of the Centre with other local organisations. One possible use might well be to host an occasional forum on faith/ecology matters.

What we can achieve here, by bringing people together to respond to social and spiritual need, may still in the bigger picture seem only a tiny pinpoint of hope. In a global crisis so great, we need huge interlocking endeavours, helped and guided by people in many lands, expert in many disciplines. Mercifully there are those with experience and vision who have long been devoting themselves to the key issues and can speak with authority about them.

One such expert is **Herbert Girardet**: co-founder of the World Future Council, recipient of a UN Global 500 Award for Environmental Achievements, international consultant, adviser, prolific writer and TV film-maker. Professor Girardet's chief concern, over 25 years, has been the need and the means to develop **sustainable relationships between People and Planet**. More recently his main focus has been on sustainability in urban development. His latest book is '*A Renewable World - Energy, Ecology, Equality*'.

The Friends are privileged that he has taken up their invitation to speak on:

--- **ETHICS AND ECOLOGY** ---

at Monmouth Priory on Saturday 14th November at 3.00 pm

[adjoining St Mary's (Church in Wales) whose landmark spire overlooks Monmouth town]

**What he has to say will challenge and inspire everyone concerned for the world's future.
Do not miss this opportunity to hear him! Entry is free – donations invited.
Refreshments available afterwards.**

Professor Girardet and his colleagues are working to establish global policy frameworks for two related purposes: to minimise the impact we make upon nature by our use of energy; and to enhance the capacity of nature to renew itself. For that to happen, we need first to 'build bridges' between all races and creeds (religious or political): to identify common ethical and spiritual values, find a common language to talk about them, and so de-fuse mutual suspicion and old hatreds. All this is essential if we are ever to guarantee fair distribution of resources and the reality of peace and justice, even the survival of the planet.

Jesus Christ spoke of Himself as the Way to the Father. The 14th-century St Catherine of Siena called Him the Bridge; and pictured all humanity trying to struggle across "from earth to heaven". Christians try to follow in Jesus' steps and are promised His strength to help them. If He is our Bridge, we too are meant in

some sense to become bridges, enablers for others of relationship and reconciliation. We are asked to respond to every possible kind of need, give unstinting support, neither patronise nor count the cost – but to remember that these aspirations are not the prerogative of Christians but of all people of goodwill; that in the kingdom of God "the last shall be first".

The Friends' overall purpose can be described as bridge-building of this kind. Their outreach stems firmly from Christian roots while embracing widely-held values (reverence for life, justice, fairness, compassion, for example) that are vital for social cohesion and for making real the universal covenant of peace. Though the Friends were originally founded for a single purpose, to commission the statue of Mary, they sensed that more might develop from that. When they found lodging for the sculptor (Philip Chatfield) at the home of Barbara Girardet, at first they simply welcomed this happy chance, knowing her love for the Abbey. They knew at that stage hardly anything of her husband's work, learning about it only when Philip had already spent happy months living in their grounds, the statue was almost complete, and we had to decide whether the Friends should now end their activities and disband ... If you are familiar with Greek icons you will know that Mary often figures as Hodegetria: a guide, "one who shows the way". In this tradition she is depicted holding the Child Jesus on one arm, while her other hand literally points out the way for us to go – towards Him.....

The pieces of the original 13th-century statue remain on view in the area to your left as you enter the Abbey precinct from the shop, in the sheltered corner where Philip did much of his carving. We are happy now to have beside the new statue in the Abbey church a permanent information sign for visitors' benefit. The attractive panels, kindly supplied by Cadw, designed and crafted by Ned Heywood, have a distinctive style in contrast to the standard signs. They were in place just in time for this year's Vespers service, and mark the end of the first stage of the Friends' history while the next stage is already taking shape. (It is worth noting, however, that the current income level required before we can apply for charity registration has now risen to £5,000 a year!)

We send our greetings to you all and our thanks, as ever, for your commitment, your generosity and your prayers. All these we would ask you to continue for the way ahead. God bless you.

*John Dearnley
Nora Hill*

Revd. John Dearnley and Revd. Nora Hill
Co-Chairs of the *Friends of Our Lady of Tintern*

www.ourladyoftintern.co.uk