

## **Sermon for the Hilfield Centenary – Saturday, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

*'Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.'* 1 Peter 2.5

Every decade over the past one hundred years here at Hilfield has seen some new building project. The work had been begun before the first Br Giles and his two companions arrived here on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 1921. What we now know as Juniper, Bernard and Clare houses were built in Dorset vernacular style during the time of the Little Commonwealth, the short-lived experimental school which preceded the coming of the brothers. There was another big project in the 1960's when Leo and Douglas houses were erected in their utilitarian concrete and brick.

But during the years between and since then building work has continually been taking place - converting, developing, expanding: the cow-byre of Flowers Farm into a chapel, the old covered reservoir into a cow-byre, Br Douglas' jam factory into the sacristy, the tailoring shop into a brothers' common room and then into accommodation for guests. The building that we used to call the White Elephant - because nobody seemed to know what it was for so that it became a place for storing anything we couldn't think of a place for - has become the site of the biomass boiler and an amazing craft room. I could go on for the work continues - the composting loos and the Friary's very own 'pissoir' were completed for your convenience on this field only this morning.

The purpose of all this activity has been to make room. To make room, initially, for wayfarers - the homeless men who wandered from doss-house to doss-house looking for work, a home and a purpose in life. This place has been a precious sanctuary for so many. As the years went on the work was to make room for those who arrived to test their calling to the Franciscan way (there were twenty-five brothers living here when I first visited nearly fifty years ago); also, for the many guests who have come looking for peace, for prayer and for play. I think of all those who have been part of the Families' Camps and Youth Camps since the early seventies. The buildings have more recently been shaped and adapted to make room for those who have come to share in the life and work of the community here at Hilfield - to accommodate young volunteers, couples, children and cows. The work of making room for 'the other', the business of hospitality, has been at the heart of this place for more than a hundred years.

The work on the land that has been happening faithfully and fruitfully, especially over the past fifteen years, has also been about making room: for species of plant and animal; for a rich biodiversity of life that is other than ourselves and yet with which we are all intimately connected as brothers and sisters. The land itself has become a place where the hospitality of the earth is shared and rejoiced over.

This 'making room for the other', which has been happening here for one hundred years, is hugely significant today in a world where there is a lot of construction work going on, but often with the aim of keeping 'the other' out - the gated communities, the security fences with their cameras, the border walls. They are erected to protect and control 'our space', to make people feel safe from intruders. And so, when an incursion occurs in the form of a tiny virus over which we find that we have no control, we are seized by anxiety and are left floundering. It was indicative that the first reaction of the Church authorities to the Covid 19 pandemic was to lock the doors.

Hilfield Friary as a place and community of making room for 'the other' is important because the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is revealed to us, especially at this season of Advent/Christmas, is all about accommodation. God finds room in the womb of the Virgin Mary because, full of grace, she is empty enough, spacious enough, to receive the Word-made-flesh. God seeks room in a stable because there is no room anywhere else. The Good News which we have received and in which we stand is that God ever seeks room with us – in every corner of our lives and every part of our world. There is no place which God will not occupy with his merciful, compassionate and unbounded presence – if we allow him. The Good News is essentially that God makes room – empties or 'others' Godself – in order that we might 'evermore dwell in him and he in us'.

The gift and blessing of Giles and of those who have come after him at Hilfield is that they seem to have got the message that the life into which Jesus calls us - life in all its fullness - is essentially about making room, surrendering territory. In doing so, they and we have discovered the paradox that in surrendering space for the sake of others, our lives and the place itself seem to have become more spacious. We have found that in the Father's house there are 'many mansions', an abundance of rooms – for the stranger, for the outsider within each one of us, for a wider community, and for the teeming life of the natural world. The God of Jesus Christ is an hospitable God. In its second century may Hilfield Friary continue to be built according to this gracious architecture.