

## Holy Week with the Franciscans – “Pax et Bonum”

Over this Passiontide and Easter, my friend, Richard and I went to stay at Hilfield Friary as a spiritual retreat and to experience the hospitality of the Brothers and Community Members that live there. I thought I would write a reflection on our profound experiences and some takeaways from experiencing a different expression of the Christian faith.

The Friary itself is set in the beautiful Dorset countryside on 25 acres of estate. There are several buildings and houses on site, a graveyard, farmland and a pristine wet woodland, all maintained for wildlife and of national significance.

The Society of St Francis (SSF) was formally founded as an Anglican Religious Order in 1936. It has a fascinating past and I encourage you to check out their website and Wikipedia page for a fuller history of their organisation and the amazing work that they do. Suffice it to say, they seek to honour Jesus Christ by following the way of St Francis through the Anglican Communion. Principally, they are made up of 3 Orders. The First Order is the Brothers and the Second order is the Sisters. They have taken vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. The Third Order is the secular members (not monks or nuns) who, not necessarily living on site, have taken simple vows as community members. Their motto is Pax et Bonum: Peace and Happiness. It was a favoured saying of St Francis and from what I found, embodies a deep philosophy of their community.

Where we stayed, the Hilfield friary had half a dozen Brothers on site and many more community members living with their families. Everyone mucks in and has responsibilities for cooking, cleaning, maintaining the farm and gardens and a million and one other tasks either gone unnoticed or too numerous for me to name. Guests also helped, especially at meal times. All tasks were done joyfully and without fuss. Much of the food is grown on site, including any meat that is eaten there or sourced from Riverford Organics. Environmentalism is a strong theme of the Friary

Many of the guests had stayed before and all seemed to fit back into daily life like a favoured jumper and for myself and Richard as newbies we have seldom felt more warmly welcomed.



Quickly you find yourself sucked into the daily rhythm which goes thusly:

7:00 private prayer and meditation in the chapel  
7:30 Morning Prayers  
8:00 silent breakfast  
10:15 tea time  
12:30 pm Midday Prayers  
13:00 Lunch  
16:15 afternoon snack  
17:15 Evening prayers  
19:00 Dinner  
20:00 Night prayers



There was no particular expectation of attendance to any of the above and we were free to come and go as we pleased. Richard and I went to all the services and activities that we could to try and get the most out of the experience. Other than that, we spent a good portion of the rest of our time walking in the beautiful Dorset countryside and studying in their fantastically stocked Theology Library. To prevent this reflection from becoming a simple blow by blow account in the style of “what I did on my holidays....” I have set out a few main themes and takeaways:

### The Chapel



All their services take place in the Chapel which is made from a converted cow shed as I recall. The adornments are symbolic and purposeful. However, it did not feel austere or puritan but welcoming. If I were to imagine the early church, I may well think of something not too far from it. Somehow, they manage to marry reverential and high church with simplicity. There was never any pressure to act in any particular way, but I personally found myself genuflecting and crossing myself regularly. Something about the place felt strongly sacred. They also kept Holy Water by the front entrance for ‘remembering one’s baptism’ a practice I had not previously experienced much of, but seems quite symbolically powerful.



## The Services

All services were liturgical (with hymns) and only two services had any sort of homily/sermon. The liturgy was taken from the Daily Offices of the SSF and a hymn book or other resource. At first the methods of flicking around the book to find the correct forms, responsories and canticles and placing coloured ribbons in each seemed quite arcane. But after a couple of services I started to get the hang of it and the Brothers were always instructive in letting us all know the right page numbers. All hymns were done voice only with the tunes given in musical notation and the tune started by Brother Hugh and by the last verse we had normally all managed to get it right. There was often plainsong used for many parts of the liturgy. I particularly liked the use of the Magnificat and Benedictus plain songs. These simple services pulled us into the scriptures so that one ended up reading a large portion on Old and New Testament along with Psalms. The readings or lessons, as you would expect, really linked us into the passion narrative. It made the Word come alive so that even without exposition there was a clear golden thread through the whole biblical narrative pointing towards Jesus. Coming away from this experience, I would like to follow the liturgical year more carefully as I can see more clearly how it has been crafted over centuries to articulate by osmosis the Christian understanding of God's Word.

## Easter Celebrations



To continue the theme of above, Richard and I felt fully immersed in the passion narrative. Maundy Thursday was an all-night vigil which despite the gravity and spiritual significance I only lasted until about midnight, but I comfort myself knowing the disciples could not stay up either. On Good Friday we had the stations of the cross which was themed around climate change and environmental destruction. The services also became very pared down so that there were no Glory bes. Alleluias or responsories. That and the clearing of the chapel had a lot of symbolic significance. The whole chapel suddenly felt empty and bereft without the blessed sacrament after the final Eucharist (Lords Supper) where we ate the last of the Host. I believe this is symbolic of Jesus emptying his whole self. As part of the preparations for Easter everyone was given jobs to do for the service these included 6 readings and 6 psalms. We also had one person act as Deacon and I volunteered Richard (as he was not at the meeting, he could not stop me) to be Thurifer and sub-deacon. I believe this is the first time so many guests have all been involved in the service. I felt privileged to be involved and read psalm 126.

Easter day was an early one starting with a massive bonfire before dawn in the graveyard we then processed the pascal candle and thurible back to the Chapel and we had many readings and an uplifting Gloria with lots of noisy percussion to signify Jesus' resurrection. There was more but too much to relate here, but it was a memorable and uplifting service.

### Concluding Thoughts

The Hilfield Friary is an amazing community living out the Gospel in everything they do. People of all ages and backgrounds and Christian understanding were welcomed with open arms. For me it was a time of spiritual nourishment where I experienced the passion narrative and deepened my understanding of Christ in my life. I think there is lots we can learn from the Franciscan way of life of simplicity, peace and happiness.

I personally have a new appreciation of our higher high church/ritualised Anglican expressions. I connected strongly with such as singing the Magnificat (song of Mary), venerating the cross,

partaking of the common cup during the Eucharist and also taking Confession for the first time. I would like to continue exploring the use and theology of these ancient practices and how I can keep incorporating them into my own worship to better glorify Christ in my life. My biggest takeaway is that, however we express it, we should firmly put ourselves within the drama and reality of the new covenant every day.

Finally, I would like to say thank you to all those whom live and work at Hilfield making it a small piece of Eden bringing salt and light to the world.

Pax et Bonum,

Greg Wilgar-Jones