Mary’s Dowry

By re-dedicating England to Mary on the 29th of March 2020 and inviting all parishes and faithful to consecrate themselves to Mary anew, the English Bishops have made a very Catholic statement indeed. There is a long story behind this. Back in the Middle Ages, the devotion to Our Lady was widely spread all over the British Isles. In 1381, King Richard II and his consort Anne of Bohemia went to the Shrine of Our Lady of the Pew, in Westminster Abbey, where they offered England to Our Lady as Her Dowry.

The Dowry was the part of his estate which a medieval lord put aside for his wife to support her during her widowhood. The spiritual meaning is that England is given to Mary as her special portion and inheritance. She can rely on the support of the English people’s devotion. In return, it is hoped that she will keep a loving and maternal eye on the country. How shall we transpose this mediaeval imagery to our present times?

On the one hand, we promise that we shall pray to Mary, speak of Mary, celebrate Mary, invite people to do the same, and, above all, live up to Mary’s expectations –which are the Gospel’s. As a good mother, she wants the best for us. She wishes us to be saints. This consecration is a call for our conversion. On the other hand, we expect Mary’s protection and her guidance for ourselves, for the Church in this country, for our country itself, especially all those in leadership positions.

All considered, it is not a bad deal. But there is more to it. It is not so much a bargain as a question of love: between Mary and us, Mary and our Church, Mary and our country. Once more, we are summoned to the foot of the Cross where Jesus entrusted His beloved disciple to His mother. We are Mary’s inheritance and she is ours. We belong to her and she belongs to us, as a child to his mother, and a mother to all and each of her children. When England claims to be Mary’s dowry, no other country may protest. English Catholics are only doing what all Christians are entitled to do: to claim Mary’s motherly love for themselves.

When the Savignac monks arrived at Quarr in 1132, they spontaneously dedicated their abbey church and their monastery to Our Lady. Quarr too can claim to be Mary’s dowry. All its lands, its buildings, its inhabitants belong, in a certain sense, to Mary. She is the Lady of Quarr, which means that any visitor to Quarr can turn to her with the simplicity and the trust of a child towards his loving mother. Yes, she will help!

We may thank our Bishops for reminding us that, at the heart of our relationship of faith with Jesus, we are entrusted by Jesus Himself to the maternal care of Mary.

Abbot Xavier

Friends of Quarr

As the Friends of Quarr reach their seventh year of inception we are pleased to say we have almost raised the target amount for the Accessible Paths Project. The Friends are grateful to be in receipt of a £500 grant from The WightAID Foundation towards this project. It is hoped that, weather permitting we will be able to start the project soon.

The Easter Retreat organised by the Friends with the Community will be held on Saturday 28th March, details of the programme will be posted on the Quarr Abbey website on the ‘events tab.’ The Retreat is free and open to all, any donations on the day will be in aid of the church windows. Lunch on the day may be bought from the abbey Teashop or you can bring your own.

The London Concert Choir will be performing Rachmaninoff Vespers on 24th May 2020 in our abbey church in aid of our project. Further details will be available on the Quarr Abbey website, nearer the time.

If you wish to join the Friends please email: chair.friends@quarr.org

Or you can download a leaflet from the Quarr Abbey website on the ‘support tab’.
Quarr Abbey Chronicle

Recent Events in the life of the Abbey

NOVEMBER 30th  This evening with Vespers the community ushered in the first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of a new liturgical year. And at Compline we used our new Compline books for the first time. Professionally designed and professionally printed they mark a significant step forward in our project to provide the choir with a full set of good quality books for the Divine Office. The designer, Arnaud de Castelbajac is currently working on the book for Vespers, and a book for Lauds is in the planning stage. Hopefully, now that basic decisions have been made regarding typeface and layout, progress will be uninterrupted.

DECEMBER  This Advent saw the start of a new liturgical year in which the gospel according to Saint Matthew is given priority in the readings appointed for the Sunday Masses. To prepare ourselves for this year Fr. Abbot invited the Jesuit Scripture scholar, Fr. Nicholas King to give us a series of conferences on the evangelist and his gospel. There are few clues to the biography of Matthew apart from the account of his conversion to Christ from the tax office. But Fr. Nicholas argued that he was a product of the scribal schools prominent at the time. Had he considered a “religious” vocation, turned aside to tax gathering, and then been recalled and reclaimed by Jesus? All is uncertain but it was a thought provoking possibility. And the gospel which begins with an announcement of “Emmanuel” (God-with-us) and ends with a proclamation that Christ is with us to the close of the age, affirms a faith in divine providence which inspires faith and hope.

JANUARY  Fr. Nicholas, our guestmaster, participates in the annual monastic guestmasters conference most years. The conference is always held out of season when the guesthouse can be closed for a time with minimal inconvenience. But travel at that time of year is apt to be troublesome and this year the conference was held at Pluscarden Abbey, near Elgin in Scotland. Nevertheless, Fr. Nicholas is a rugged northerner, and made the most of it, and in fact enjoyed a very pleasant overnight train journey to Inverness.

The Pluscarden community received everyone very warmly and all conference goers enjoyed the guest facilities of another house for a change. The theme of the conference focussed on mental health issues, an important matter for any guestmaster called upon to minister to some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

JANUARY  The very success of our Teashop and Tea Garden had led to some problems.

The hardworking staff struggled to serve the queues of hungry and thirsty visitors in the crowded Summer months. This Winter something was done about it. The Teashop was closed for a week in January, and Sam and Kelly, our carpenters, assisted by numerous members of the Teashop staff, introduced a new layout to the premises. Sam and Kelly constructed a new counter which allowed for much needed space for those serving and preparing food and drinks. A second till was put in place to help with the queueing and tables were re-arranged to make the most of the space. Space for the Farmshop had to be sacrificed but, by good management, stock levels were preserved and the whole given a greater feeling of spaciousness. The chronicler was much impressed by the result.

JANUARY 26th  The bishops of England and Wales have dedicated the liturgical year 2019–2020 to the Word of God, and encouraged Catholics to deepen their understanding and love of the Scriptures. In response to their call, we have enthroned a Bible in a prominent place in our Sanctuary and made the Word of God the centre of proclamation on the Third Sunday of Ordinary time after Christmas. And during Lent this year, members of the community are offering weekly talks on the mystery of the Word and Christian life, talks to be given in the Abbey Church on Sundays at 3.30p.m. All are welcome to attend.

The Sufferings of Mary

Our Lady trials did meet,
Though in a manner bitter sweet,
For the sword pierced her life severe.
But the soul's sweet tenderness
Of heart true
Shows out-flowing graces –
Purity, concern, empathy, care sincere.
When tragedy melts, bitter to sweet attained
Like gold tried, the soul sustained
In fire, the prize ultimate will be gained.

Dom Brian Gerard Kelly
FEBRUARY  Quarr Abbey Internship programme is looking forward to its busiest year yet. Three two month programmes are in view and the first has already started. Sam and Huw have already occupied their rooms at the very top of the old guesthouse and now join the community daily in church for Mass and each of the Divine Offices. After spending time in Lectio Divina each morning they go out to the tasks that have to be done – for them, mostly gardening work about the property. They meet regularly with Fr. Luke, the Intern Master, and once a week receive a conference from another member of the community – perhaps on the Bible, the Rule or the Liturgy. And just in case things look a little too solemn they join the community for recreation at certain times during the week.

FEBRUARY 5th  Today the chronicler was arrested by the sight of a small knot of people gathered excitedly at the door of the volunteer’s room, or “Nammet” room as it is called locally. Going to investigate, he found a struggle in progress, a struggle to open the door of the room for its first day in use. The key, seemingly, would not fit the lock until Matt with the aid of a hammer managed to turn it. But inside things looked much better. Sam and Kelly and Mack had transformed a dirty, bare and crumbling farm building into a clean and welcoming space for volunteers to have tea and coffee and eat their packed lunches. But, Matt, our volunteers co-ordinator has more to say on the matter elsewhere in this issue.

FEBRUARY 10th  Today is the feast of St. Scholastica, the sister of our holy father, Benedict. As is customary we go to join our sisters at the Abbey of St. Cecilia’s in Ryde to sing Vespers. The cunning of the choirmistress has arranged that the nuns and monks sing alternate antiphons so as to replicate the good humoured disputation of Saints Scholastica and Benedict in their own words. The last word falls inevitably to the nun – but it is, after all, her feast.

If you would like to join the Friends of Quarr please email the Chairman, Dr Rebecca Ashton: chair.friends@quarr.org or you can download a membership form from the Friends’ webpage on the Quarr Abbey website ‘support’ tab.
This intricate painting bears witness to a profoundly Christian culture in early Anglo-Saxon England. Here is the carpet page introducing Saint John’s Gospel in the Lindisfarne Gospel Book. Painted by Eadfrith, abbot of the Northumbrian monastery of Lindisfarne in the early years of the eighth century, it is a potent reminder that there is often more to a painting than meets the eye. Eadfrith’s contemporary Saint Bede tells us that religious images were fashioned to do more than excite admiration for human skill or even veneration for a divine mystery. Religious art was “viva scriptura”, “living writing”, and a stimulus to meditation, compunction and a deeper appreciation of Christian teaching. This is especially true when it presents a mystery as profound as the cross of Christ.

The sign of the cross was central to early Christian devotion; and it was a sign of victory. Northumbrians in particular could recall that King Oswald had won his kingdom in battle after planting a hastily constructed wooden cross in the earth, and praying the almighty, ever-living and true God to show him his mercy. But the true victory signified by the cross was, of course, Christ’s own victory over Satan, sin and death, and so close was the association of the person of Christ and his cross, that the cross came to stand for Christ himself. In the Anglo-Saxon poem, “The Dream of the Rood” the cross is shown wounded with nails, running with blood, suffering with the young hero who hangs upon it. This might explain why the cross rather than the crucifixion was the preferred image of the age.

There is yet another sign of the cross in Eadfrith’s painting and one easy to overlook. Above and below the Tau crosses set either side of the design are four small fylfots, better known from their Sanskrit name as swastikas. Today, the fylfot is inevitably associated with the evils of National Socialism, but we need to recall the days of its innocence. It was an ancient symbol even in Anglo-Saxon times and represented the thunderbolt. The thunderbolt was wielded by the god Thor against the giants, the forces of chaos. Christians took this pagan symbol, and through association with the cross of Christ retained it as a sign of power. A reminder that we must rely completely upon God’s strength, that we cannot save ourselves, it was made into a badge of protection in the form of brooches, pendants and emblems to decorate holy books.

The Sign of the Cross

four Tau, or “T” crosses to terminate in rather elaborate ornaments outside the rectangular border of the design. We see the cross and the border bound together.

The rectangle is a common symbol of the “orbis quadratus”, the squared world of the ancients, with its four corners, four winds and four angels according to the Book of Revelation (7:1).

The cross within the rectangle therefore is a sign of universal salvation, Christ embracing the four regions of the world, touching the east, the west, the north and the south. Eadfrith perfectly illustrates the teaching of Saint Bede, that the four arms of the cross signify the kingdom of faith holding sway everywhere.
Within the four arms of the cross we can see four large rectangles filled with decoration. The meaning of these is uncertain but they remind us of another contemporary image, the “Maestas” or “Majesty”, which shows the figure of Christ surrounded by the four symbols of the evangelists taken from the Book of Revelation: the man for Matthew, the lion for Mark, the calf for Luke and the eagle for John. Eadfrith presents us with a diagrammatic equivalent: the cross for Christ and the four rectangles (books?) for the four evangelist symbols. The whole shows us how the mystery of the cross is made manifest in the preaching of the fourfold Gospel. The evangelist symbols interpret the cross as a sign of paradox: lowliness appears in the mortal man, but loftiness in the soaring eagle; victimhood in the sacrificial calf, but dignity in the regal lion.

The background of the carpet page is, perhaps, the most marvellous part of the painting. It is filled with stylized birds, woven together into one interlocking design. And notice how these birds fight one another, grapple together with beak and claw. But this is not natural history. Once more we are in the presence of symbols. The Riddles of Saint Aldhelm, bishop of Sherborne, are illuminating here. They show birds, and all animals, to exemplify a cosmos characterized by continual tension and universal strife. In Eadfrith’s painting we can see how the cross of Christ, which rules the design, regulates the birds too. Their warfare is moderated by a general harmony and order. The cross is at work, pacifying mankind and all creation. The cross is a sign of peace.

In conclusion we must turn again to the border of the painting, which is decorated with eight ornaments. This too is full of meaning. We know from the writings of the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin, that the border of just such a design could be likened to the crown won by all who venerate the cross of Christ. Eadfrith’s border represents the crown of life offered to a world redeemed. The eight ornaments (jewels in the crown?) signify eternal life because eight is the number associated with resurrection. Christ rose on a Sunday, and Sunday is called the eighth day because, with the resurrection, it is not the beginning of a new week in time, but the consummation of all time in eternity. It is not the first of another seven days, but the eighth and last and eternal day. By painting this border Eadfrith made the sign of the cross into a sign of hope.

By Duncan Smith

The Island of Lindisfarne
We very much appreciate the help and support that we receive from our dedicated volunteers at Quarr Abbey. We have a volunteer programme that welcomes volunteers from all walks of life, all ages and all abilities. Many of our volunteers have been with us a long time but this does not stop us from welcoming new volunteers to help with the vast array of jobs that need to be undertaken, day by day, to keep the Abbey functioning as it should. We advertise locally, on site and also with Isle of Wight volunteer organisations.

In late 2018, I was made aware of a modest grant opportunity to apply for. The grant was being made available through the ‘Down to the Coast’ East Wight Landscape Project with Quarr Abbey match funding the project and not forgetting a very kind donation from our neighbours at Fishbourne Parish Council. Much of what Quarr Abbey provides to the wider community enabled us to fit the criteria for the grant and apply for funds. Bearing our committed current, and (hopefully) new volunteers in mind, I thought that we should create a special place where volunteers and Quarr Abbey staff could mix and mingle and share a place to eat, relax and chat during their breaks. With this thought in mind, the ‘Nammet Room’ project was born. For those not on the Island or not au fait with the term ‘Nammet’, it is an old Isle of Wight word that is described as ‘Originally Bread and cheese with a drink of beer consumed by people working in the field’. There’s no beer available at lunch any more I’m afraid but the bread and cheese would be ok!

A building had to be selected for this use and where better than one of the disused farm buildings within the farm yard. Close to the workshops and the kitchen, it was the perfect spot. The room that was selected still had a built-in feed trough and its original hay manger, something I was keen to keep in the finished room as a subtle nod to its former use. Initially, we didn’t expect there to be the amount of administration involved with permissions though. As the farm building was within the ‘curtilage’ of the Grade 1 listed Church, the Nammet room was to be regarded with the same status!

After many constructive and positive meetings with the local council planners and building control the room was finished using our expert in-house works team and staff. The room has instant heaters, a communal eating area, a kitchenette and lockers. It has been welcomed by the volunteers and staff as a much improved facility.

The excellent finish of the room is befitting of the generous help from the individuals who support us by giving Quarr Abbey their time and skills.

If you are considering volunteering at Quarr Abbey please contact: m.noyce@quarr.org

Matthew Noyce
Estates Manager Quarr Abbey
Let us enter the time of Lent with the prophet Joel, and listen to three words, three verbs, which his powerful voice cries to us today.

Return

We have gone astray. We went in the wrong direction. We followed our own inclinations leading us away from God, away from the Father. The divine voice invites us now, gently and powerfully: Return! "Return to me." "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil."

We have all heard our SatNav device telling us we have missed the right turn and must now turn back as soon as possible. If we want to reach our goal, we have better turn back and return. But we know also what sometimes happens: we think we know better, we do not obey the voice of our navigator, we follow our own vision and intuitions.

Today, God’s voice tells us very clearly: it is high time you stop, turn back and return. Return to the Holy Spirit: he is the guide. Return to Christ: he is the way. Return to the Father: he is the goal. Listen to the Word proclaimed in the liturgical assembly. Obey the voice in your conscience. Return to your Creator. Find anew your bearings: look at the Cross; walk ‘Easter-wards’; tread the way of the Gospel.

Rend

“Rend your hearts and not your garments.” It was a sign of bereavement and mourning among the Jews. You would have with you a piece of cloth and rend it to express your distress. Now the prophetic voice asks for more: “Rend your hearts”. Is the Word of God heart-rending for me today? Am I so deaf? Is my heart a heart of stone? It seems I do not really hear anything, I hear, but it does not get inside. I hear it, I say it, I promise it to myself, but nothing happens. My deep self is not touched.

Weep

We know that tears are a sign of a broken heart. There are tears which are only weakness, because we weep for ourselves but do not really want to do anything to change the situation. These tears are hypocritical, self-complacent, distasteful.

But there are silent tears which spring from the depths of the heart which God has patiently and powerfully rent through the working of His Word and His Spirit. We had better pray for the gift of these precious tears. There are sins in me, in us, in the Church at large, in the world, we can only answer with tears.

These tears say Yes to God’s justice: He is right, we have been wrong; He is rightly angry, we deserve punishment.

But these tears give thanks for God’s mercy too: Once more, we went astray and once more He called us back and changed our hearts. We confessed our sins and once more He forgave our trespasses. We had forgotten Him, overlooked His law, despised His love: He never ceased to love us; He loves us now; He reaches to us a hand of forgiveness and hope. "Follow me!”

Let us return to Him who calls us.

Let us rend our hearts and let God rend our hearts.

Let us weep in silent love. With an infinite hope: for ourselves, for the Church, for each and all of our brethren for whom and with whom we are entering today the Lenten journey.

Abbot Xavier
Christ, the Word of God

The Bible is often referred to as “the Word of God” and of course that is highlighted in this year specially devoted to it, but Christ is the real Word of God. God has spoken all He has to say through Him. Yet the Bible can also fittingly be called “the Word of God” because it shows us who Christ is. Indeed Saint Jerome went as far as to say that he who is ignorant of the Bible is ignorant of Christ. So let us look into the Bible to find Christ.

It starts by telling us something of God: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God made everything and the first evidence of His activity is light: God shows Himself at work first of all by enabling us to see – and to make sense of what there is.

If we now turn to the beginning of John’s gospel, we find an echo of the beginning of the Bible: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” In other words, Christ was the One through whom everything was made and He is God. He is the Word – the Greek word is λόγος (logos) from which we get our word “logic”. He is the One through whom all things make sense: In Him is that unifying power that gives life. In Him is that coherence that enables us to find meaning in our lives. He is our light.

Yet we know that there is darkness in the world and that many senseless things are done there. Senseless things were done to Christ and – this is the miracle of miracles – this was the process through which sense was restored to the world. The prophet Isaiah foretold it: “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” This passage from the middle of the Bible shows us Christ in the dereliction of the cross, becoming ugly that we might become beautiful, sorrowful that we might become joyful, wounded that we might be healed.

So the Bible shows us Christ as the One through whom creation came to be and as the one through whom a new creation comes to be in which we can be who we are meant to be, in which our lives can be meaningful and in which the primordial light of God shines anew. Both of these views of Christ are presented together in Saint Paul’s letter to the Colossians. His work of creation is presented between two showings of His work of bringing us back into the light. God “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” Again, we are being told that Christ is at the source of all creation and that He gives coherence to everything. But there is more: in His work of reconciliation He becomes the head, the animating meaning, of His Body the Church. The invisible God, the One who makes sense of everything, is shown to us through the Church.

And that Church gives us the Bible through which we know Christ. We can read in it His actual words. You can get Bibles that have them in red so that they stand out. In reading them, and taking them to heart, we become more like Him.

If you want a place to start, try the first twelve verses of Chapter Five of Saint Matthew’s gospel. They show us how to be truly happy. We become so by being “the poor in spirit… those who mourn… the meek… those who hunger and thirst for righteousness… the merciful… the pure in heart… the peacemakers… those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” In a word, we become truly happy by being like Christ, who gives everything to give us a peace in our hearts that is so wonderful and so deep that nothing in this world can give it, who gives us through his words the fullness of joy, who gives us love that is beyond generous.

Through the Bible we find meaning in our lives because there we find Christ. And He is our light, our life and our love.

Fr. Luke Bell