

Whitton – Notre Dame des Bois Visit November 2nd – 4th 2012

Eight intrepid souls from the Whitton Benefice travelled to Normandy over the first weekend in November to visit the Paroisse Notre Dame des Bois with which we are twinned.

The warmth of the welcome which greeted us at the Canappville Prieurie when we arrived mid-day Friday was echoed throughout the weekend in the many encounters across the sixteen villages which make up the parish. We were given a beautifully produce booklet with the programme and pictures of people involved. Our time there was packed with interesting visits to a number of the churches, two farms and a fine manor house.

Everywhere we went we had presentations and amazing hospitality. We learnt about the life of the parish and how they cope with so many churches and so few priests, its setting in the local society and the active ministries undertaken by members of the churches. The Lay people are closely involved in the preparation of families for christenings, with couples getting married and with the bereaved preparing and often taking funerals. There are groups responsible for children's work, *catéchèse*, and for *solidarité*, care for people in need locally and overseas. There is also a hospital chaplaincy led by a lay person.

They are a Catholic parish and so it was wonderful to be included in their worship, which was all in French, of course! On the Friday evening we divided up and went to two churches where there were Masses for All Souls, on Saturday we took part in Vespers in the Priory chapel at Canappeville and on Sunday we all went to the Mass in Quatremare, where we were invited to do the Prayers and Peter Ball preached the sermon (both done in French!). The Mass concluded with a very special moment when all the clergy (3 Anglican and 1 Catholic) shared in pronouncing the final blessing.

Something that stood out for us was the number of people involved in different aspects of the Church's ministry and the fact that they didn't think of themselves as doing anything out of the ordinary. They are very involved in the lives of those they live amongst and work with. They are, without doubt, living out their Christian lives, modelling a care and concern for all those they come into contact with.

Their acceptance of us and their interest in our lives and our fellowships and their willingness to share what works and what doesn't reflected the love and care we see modelled by Jesus. The struggles are the same; they are a rural parish with farming at the heart of their failing economy. The Missionary Brothers and Sisters of the Countryside minister alongside the lay people.

We have much to share and learn from each other and as we journey together, and our friendships grow, our lives will be much richer from knowing each other. The twinning of our parishes is a true blessing.

We look forward to a return visit from our brothers and sisters in Notre Dame des Bois in May 2014. In the meantime we have a visit from the Diocese of Evreux in January 2013 when our visitors will spend most of their time in Marlborough Deanery and the Whitton Team Benefice so they get a flavour of Wiltshire!