

15th May 2013 Thanksgiving to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Re-Hallowing of St Mary's Church and to celebrate 50 years of the National Trust on Brownsea Island.

It is very good to be here. This is special. In thanksgiving to God I want also to thank those of you who care for Brownsea Island and keep it special.

It is hard to think of a place that makes it more possible to experience "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" than Brownsea Island.

If God exists, God is everywhere but a holy place is a place set apart for God. There was a tradition in the early Church of Christians going to remote places, into the desert alone. It wasn't escapism so much as a confrontation of self stripped down, about asceticism rather than natural beauty. It is a tradition that has continued from time to time within the church. There is no desert in Britain, which is why islands were so important for the development of Christianity: Iona, Lindisfarne, Bardsey. Some nuns I know had sisters who thought they were being called to the life a hermit. The only test they could find as to whether this was their true vocation was whether or not the rest of the community would be pleased if the sister went off to live alone. If they were glad to see the back of her they thought it probably wasn't a genuine vocation to the solitary life but escapism from the reality of community.

Brownsea Island, this idyllic place, has had a chequered history. In the ninth century it was a place of seclusion for a hermit seeking God, set apart from the world around but part of that Saxon Christianity which populated Dorset with 'thin' places where heaven and earth seemed very close. In the middle of the twentieth century Mary Bonham-Christie, lived here in isolation. She was less obviously a hermit for the good of the whole community but preserved Brownsea so that when she died the redoubtable Helen Brotherton, for whom we will also give thanks for today, was able to marshal the team to claim the Island as a resource for everyone, including the wonderful flora and wildlife she wanted to preserve. She was one of the founders of the Dorset Wildlife Trust and it is very fitting today that we dedicate a memorial to her. We need people of vision as well as holiness.

It is a place of great peace and tranquillity, not just in itself but for the views it gives of sea and the 'mainland', the Purbecks and Wareham as well as Poole and Bournemouth, the harbour and the open sea. This place gives perspective but the island's strategic location in the entrance to Poole Harbour has made it a lookout and fortress in warfare. In the Second World War it was a decoy, drawing bombs intended for Bournemouth and Poole. It has an industrial past and an agricultural one: daffodils sold in Covent Garden.

Scouts and Guides the world over see this island as part of their founding story, a piece of youth work bearing much fruit.

A holy place *is* set apart, so that God is met there in a way that is more difficult to find in the crowded busyness of daily life. It is not escapism but a place that gives perspective. It is not just important instrumentally, for what it does to us when we go back into the 'real' world. It is a sanctuary, a holy place in and of itself. So we give thanks for the way Brownsea Island was reclaimed as a sanctuary 50 years ago and for the *re*-hallowing of this church as part of that project of which Helen Brotherton was a leading part and of which the National Trust are the guardians.

The vision and the values that have won through here are Christian virtues *and* they are the virtues we all recognise. The reading from the letter to the Phillipians exalted whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, an excellence worthy of praise. No wonder Brownsea is the John Lewis and Waitrose of south coast holiday resorts.

Last year I visited the National Trust office in Studland and was given a wonderful lesson in how the NT moved from being an organisation of a million to one that is now very nearly five million. I was told they segmented their membership and recognised that for some of their volunteers looking after a NT property was one of the most important things they did. They give themselves to it and cared not just for the visitors and the buildings or landscape but for the spirit of the place. Others of us join the NT because it is good value. We pay your membership fee and if we visit at least three properties we have already made a profit and got good value: we are consumers of the NT. And there is everyone in between. The NT has a self-understanding that cares for something old by using the best of our modern understanding.

I am not the only bishop to think that the Church of England could learn from the National Trust. On an average Sunday morning about a million people go to the local Church of England, but many more feel they belong in a variety of ways we choose not to count. If we could segment our membership it ought to be to be a natural thing for the Church to grow in number by taking something old and developing it by using the best of contemporary marketing. That is not dissimilar to God's project in the New Testament, doing something new with an ancient tradition. In this world that needs good values we need to learn to do the best from and with each other.

What does it mean for the island to be set apart and holy now? Perhaps the issue that has become most pressing in the last 50 years is the environmental. The preservation of the red squirrel is charming but what matters more and more is the protection of habitats and ecological diversity. Otherwise our survival is threatened. We need places set apart for our environmental as we all as our spiritual health. They go together. In a busy world we need retreats, sanctuaries, deep places where we find ourselves again in relation to the creator and God's creation.

A 50th anniversary involves us looking back and there is much to give thanks for, but we all know the future is more important than the past. What we have is a direction of travel, good values and by standing on the shoulders of giants we gain a strength of commitment to that which is good.

We will have come with many memories, thoughts and prayers rooted in the past. Together on this anniversary we pray:

For all that has been; 'Thanks'
and
To all that will be; 'Yes'.

Amen