

A Reflection on Taize – France May 2008

'Bless the Lord my soul and bless God's Holy Name

Bless the Lord my soul who leads me into life'

The words of the Taize chant in the voices of the Christ Church congregation on a Sunday morning rang over and over in my head over, as we approached the Taize community from the east. We knew we were nearly there from our maps and the road signs. It was confirmed as we crossed a railway bridge where two young women sat talking; when we passed a man, heavily laden cycling up hill and three youngsters trudging obviously tired, casually putting their thumbs up hoping we might stop. We could have fitted one in the back seat if we moved our boxes of food and supplies but not all three, so we waved and passed.

Taize stands on a hill in Burgundy and suddenly, rounding the corner after the sign '*Communaute*', we saw the red roofs of the village, the church steeple and old buildings. It was 11.15am – we had arrived.

In August 1940 Brother Roger, 25 years old, settled alone in Taize. It was wartime: he began to offer hospitality to refugees, Jews in particular. He intended to create a community that would be a 'parable of community', a place where ways of trust and reconciliation could be opened up among Christians. After two years, his first brothers joined him. Today there are more than 100 brothers, Catholic and from different Protestant backgrounds, from twenty-five countries. Small groups of brothers live among the poor in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Since the end of the 1950s, tens of thousands of young adults, mainly from Eastern and Western Europe have come to Taize, seeking to find meaning for their lives. It is now a very unusual village where as well as the young adults, teenagers, children and older people from every continent come to Taize for a day, a week, a month.

That morning I had thrown open the small windows of our cottage, rented for two nights in a tiny village called Issey-L'Eveque, quite early. Mist lay in the valley beyond as the pale fingers of dawn crept across the sky. The tiny hedgerow birds were twittering and a lone cuckoo sounded from the forest. Then a clear bell like sound rang out – beautiful sparkling notes, reminiscent of the Australian bellbirds in the Blue Mountains. It was a glorious morning. Now after driving across back roads in rural Southern Burgundy, through vineyards, meadows, forests and scattered small villages we were at Taize reading the '*Welcome*' sign in French and English.

As we drove into the community we saw groups of young people in quiet study or contemplation; young children with books and papers following adult directions as they walked around; and in a large communal kitchen other young people preparing luncheon vegetables. It was quiet and calm, yet busy with an air of anticipation. Ian and I walked to the purpose built church, passing a large '*Silence*' notice and the times of the three daily services- 8.15am; 12.30pm and 6.30pm.

At 11.30 few people were walking around the huge open space set up for the mid day service. Some were kneeling heads bowed. One young girl was lighting candles in the irregular boxes standing in the front where in another church the altar would be found. We looked at the beautiful stained glass windows deeply set in the Eastern wall. The stillness was broken when two teenage boys began vacuuming the carpet, in preparation for the service, so we left.

We went to find the shop near the church. It was teeming with people of all ages looking at postcards, books, CDs, crosses and other jewellery, but mostly at the beautifully glazed, very functional pottery made by the brothers. The community accepts no donations for itself. The brothers earn their living by their own work. Their personal inheritances are given to the poor.

At 12-noon the lights in the shop were dimmed, the doors closed and 'Ouvert' signs were put up, so we with the others inside, hurriedly made our selection and lined up to pay. At 12.10 Ian and I returned to the church, already filling. We found seats on wooden benches up against the white stonewalls while others sat on the steps or the carpeted floor. Some had small wooden stools. One Taize brother was kneeling in prayer in the central section, rather like a very wide aisle, set aside for the brothers. It was completely quiet, apart from the noise of those entering to find their place. At 12.20 the bells tolled. Gradually the white-cloaked brothers entered from a side-front door. All walked reverently, silently contemplating and mostly singly, quietly finding their places all the way up the centre, then kneeling with their small wooden stools placed over their feet. Younger brothers came in helping the very old men. One was pushed in a wheelchair; others had walking sticks and a steadying younger arm to lean on. They found their chairs. Ian was quick to notice one very old brother immediately went to sleep. There were 72 brothers in the church.

At 12.30 the cantor began the chant and everyone joined in.

Jubilate, allelulia, Jubilate Deo omnis terra! Allelulia, allelulia!

[Cry out with joy to God, all the earth. Psalm 66]

Over and over we sang. There had been a slight rustling as people opened the Taize songbook to find the no.142, as displayed on a column at the front. The family next to us sang the Latin lustily, without books. I guessed they were Spanish for the father sitting next to me was reading the Bible in Spanish before the service began while a young couple – German, from the slogans on their T shirts, walked agitatedly up and down trying different places till they finally settled on the stone steps nearby, as large groups of teenagers filed quietly from both side doors filling the complete area.

Three or four chants were sung beautifully by everyone. The Songbook had English, German, Dutch and Spanish translations alongside the French or Latin, either of which used. Following this was a very long period of silence – perhaps 5 minutes, broken then by a short prayer in French, then said by another brother in English, German and finally Dutch. Two years ago when Ian and I were at Taize before the prayers and readings were in French, English, Spanish and Swedish - perhaps reflecting the nationalities of the young people attending at the time. This was one of Brother Roger's prayers:

Holy Spirit, Inner light, you shine on the happy days as on the troubled times of our lives. And when the light seems to grow dim, your presence remains.

Following the prayer was another chant, then a Gospel reading again read first in French, followed by the three other languages.

It was May 8th – Armistice Day – or VE Day-Victory in Europe, 1945. It is a French holiday. At 10.00am in almost all the French villages, towns and all over cities, there had been short services at the simple or elaborate memorials to those who had lost their lives in the wars. Wreaths were placed below inscriptions such as this one:

Les enfants of Issey-l'Eveque morte pour La France

The Gospel reading reflected this day. When it was read in English we heard the words,

'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'

A short period of silence was followed by the final chant led by the cantor, then joined by all the brothers, one on the keyboard and all the 1,000 strong congregation worshipping there. During the retiring chant the brothers left again in silence, while we all sang:

Ubi caritas et amor, ubi caritas Deus ibi est.

[Where charity and love are, God is there.]

The rest of the people gradually left the church until just a very few remained. I quietly photographed each of the vibrant stained glass windows. A sign in the foyer had said 'Photos only allowed between 1.00 and 2.00pm'. It was 1.20 when we left.

Outside most of the young people were in long lines waiting to get their lunch under signs which said –'Take only what you need- Do not waste food' Others sat around in groups eating. Ian and I found a phone box to ring Sean to share a little of the experience immediately. It was now 1.30 about 9.30pm and unfortunately he was not home.

We drove out of the community passing under the seven bells at the gate - the Taize chants now ringing in our heads, towards the town of Cluny – the site of the remains of a medieval Benedictine Abbey which had at one time been the biggest church in Christendom. A few kms down the road we found a small stream with a stone bridge. We stopped and listened to the water rushing over stones and the birds singing in the willows. We spread out our picnic on the grass- a bottle of water, a crusty baguette, two hard boiled eggs, salt and pepper and lettuce, with rich ripe strawberries from the French village market . We were smiling and indeed felt truly blessed.

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