

Bishop Robert's Visit to Shepherds Law

Parishioners of St. Mary's, Whittingham and St. Ninian's in Wooler were delighted to welcome Bishop Robert Byrne to celebrate Mass at Shepherds Law on Sunday 2 May. The visit was in celebration of the double anniversary of beloved parishioner and local hermit Brother Harold Palmer, whose 90th birthday was on May Day – and this year is also the 50th Anniversary of his foundation of Shepherds Law.

Parish Priest Fr. David Phillips served Mass for Bishop Robert, and despite the limitations of the pandemic, a celebratory atmosphere prevailed, with 25 parishioners of all ages attending the stewarded Mass and sharing a physically-distanced rendition of 'Happy Birthday' to Brother Harold.

First finding the eighteenth-century castellated 'folly' and hilltop farm in 1969, Brother Harold, then an Anglican Franciscan Friar, moved into an old caravan on site at Easter 1971 whilst building a series of small dwelling spaces around a cloister. Later, with architects Ralph Pattison and John Sanders, he helped to design the Hermitage's remarkable Romanesque Chapel of St. Mary and St. Cuthbert, which won the Royal Institute of British Architects' highest award in 2015. He is grateful to the landowners, the Carr-Ellison family, who granted him the use of their land and John Carr-Ellison still continues in his support as Chairman of the Trustees who administer Shepherds Law.

Brother Harold converted to Catholicism in the 1990s and is a parishioner at St. Mary's Whittingham. He is dedicated to healing the separation between Anglicans and Catholics and his monastic lifestyle involves the daily round of meditations, using the Book of Common Prayer as well as plainchant. He welcomes guests coming on retreat, including those who are discerning their own eremitical vocations and who may wish to join - or succeed - him at Shepherd's Law.

Although a hermit for the past 50 years, Brother Harold points out that he is not a 'recluse'; his aim was – and still is – that Shepherds Law become a small monastic community or 'skete' of the kind found in the early Northumbrian Church, as well as a continuing phenomenon on Mount Athos in the Greek Orthodox tradition.

At 90, Brother Harold says that life is physically harder on that windswept hilltop, but local parishioners, Anglican clergy friends, and carers are regular visitors and on hand to help. The fact that Brother Harold is very much a valued member of the parish community was reflected in the Bishop's homily, which acknowledged that whether contemplative, or socially and pastorally active, we are all in our own very different ways branches of the True Vine: accepting of being 'pruned' according to the Lord's will so that we can all bear fruit according to our own gifts and charisms.

The Bishop's visit in honour of Brother Harold was organised by the Friends of Shepherds Law, a group of parishioners dedicated to continuing Brother Harold's plans and to developing them further, alongside parish resources and liturgies. Suggestions so far have included a Rosary Walk at Our Lady's Grotto in Whittingham and short Pilgrimages following countryside routes between the two parishes and Shepherds Law.

On his previous visitation to the Parishes of St. Mary's and St. Ninian's last November, Bishop Robert made clear his support for parishes' roles at the heart of the Church's community and family life; his acknowledgment of Br. Harold's and Fr. David's diverse ministries of prayer and pastoral care and regard for the Beauty of Holiness, plus his warm and cheerful presence and beautiful singing voice make him a very welcome visitor in this part of the Diocese!

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