

“Kindling an Extravagant Hope”

By Richard Frazer, Minister, Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh



Greyfriars Kirk, in the heart of the Old Town of Edinburgh in Scotland, has become a destination for pilgrims, not so much for obviously religious reasons, but because of the story of a little dog. A Skye terrier by the name of Greyfriars Bobby sat on his deceased master’s grave for 14 years in the 19th century. Local people brought the wee dog food as he sustained his lonely vigil and he became a much loved local figure. But, with the introduction of dog licensing, Bobby was about to be captured by the council authorities and put down as an ownerless stray. At the last minute William Chambers, the esteemed Lord Provost of Edinburgh, purchased a license for the dog and his life was saved.

Today many thousands of people bring little tributes to lay at a stone that was erected by the Dog Aid Society of Scotland in memory of Bobby just outside Greyfriars Kirk. People are moved by this story of a dog’s loyalty and devotion. They are responding to the compassion shown to one of life’s vulnerable creatures and they love the idea of kindness between humanity and nature when so often in our experience that relationship is exploitative and harsh.



We try to offer hospitality to the thousands of visitors to our Kirk and kirkyard and share this story and the many others that are associated with our historic church that has its roots in the Franciscan Friary established here in the Middle Ages. The Franciscans cultivated medicinal herbs in the kirkyard offering help and healing to the poorest in our community. Today we have transformed parts of the kirkyard once more into an herb garden providing a therapeutic opportunity to some of the vulnerable people we continue to walk with at Greyfriars and enhancing the biodiversity of our ancient kirkyard.

Greyfriars has borne witness to many of the most turbulent events in Scotland’s history and in 1638 the National Covenant was signed in the Kirk. This document is a

watershed in human thinking and its effect has eddied down the centuries and helped to shape the modern world as we understand it today. The signing of this document is sometimes described as the greatest moment in Scotland's history and whilst the period was marked by violence, deep intolerance, religious fanaticism and persecution, it is possible to see this period as heralding a shift in thinking and human consciousness of huge significance.

Up until the beginning of the 16th Century, the Divine Right of Kings (with its origins going all the way back to the Mesopotamian kingdoms 10,000 years ago) went largely unquestioned. God ordained and anointed rulers, and it was those rulers who controlled the political and religious life of nations. In the Reformation period and in the drafting of the National Covenant a new perspective had begun to take root. Ideas of individual conscience, the democratic intellect and a vision of the value of each individual were being articulated. The seeds were sown for the patterns of democratic governance, rationalism and human rights that emerged in the west and which we now promote with vigour across the globe.

At key moments in human history, circumstances have led to seismic shifts in human consciousness and the rise of new ways of thinking and acting. The emergence of agriculture in the Neolithic period 10,000 years ago saw hunter-gatherers domesticate animals, raise crops and create the first towns. Other shifts in human consciousness have taken place with the rise (and fall) of ancient civilisations and the spread of the Christian Religion. In Europe, the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment have ushered in the modern world, as we understand it today.



Human beings adapt and develop, study and pray, settle and explore. And as they do all these things their resilience, ingenuity and imagination contribute to a groundswell of thinking that frequently leads to a “paradigm shift” in thought and behaviour.

The past few generations of unprecedented population growth and industrial expansion have forced us to recognise the needs, fragility and stresses on the Earth caused by human activity. For centuries we assumed that the Earth was an inexhaustible resource and we have only recently begun to see that the wellbeing of the earth and the viability of the human community might actually depend on our capacity to look after our world. In addition, the Earth provides us with the nourishment, climate, habitat and inspiration for our physical, emotional, spiritual and imaginative wellbeing. Many people have recently defined “nature deficit syndrome” as a condition that can manifest itself when people are deprived of exposure to the rhythms and influences of the natural environment.

We see in those who come and lay their gifts at the grave of Bobby a deep longing being expressed for a gentler relationship to the natural world and its creatures.

The current threats of climate change, resource scarcity and environmental degradation impact on all cultures, though it is the poorest in all parts of the world who shoulder the burdens of environmental degradation. These challenges demand a response and many believe they demand a shift in thinking, not just more of the same. As many have said the tools we have used to create our problems are not necessarily the same tools that will fix them. Providence is moving humanity towards new forms of consciousness and inviting us to embrace fresh ways of relating to the earth. A shift in thinking, policy and attitude as radical as that which took place in Scotland in the 17th Century with the adoption of the National Covenant is now demanded of us if humanity wishes to be a part of a flourishing earth system.

It feels as though humanity, just as it has done in the past, is re-imagining itself in an attempt to avoid the “desolation of the earth becoming the destiny of humanity”. Already signs are emerging of a new consciousness through the coming together of our spiritual traditions with our science and learning. A deeper humility and reverence for the earth system is growing as our appreciation of the depth, complexity and wonder of the Universe grows. People are grasping hold of the golden thread, present in all faiths that point us towards the importance of gentleness, compassion and kindness in our dealings with each other, the earth and its creatures.

The Green Pilgrimage Network brings together the world’s pilgrim people, in their shared search for new modes of existence. What pilgrims of all traditions hold in common is a quest for renewal and transformation. “The slow conversion of our manners,” as St Benedict put it, occurs when our journeys lead us to new perspectives about ourselves and the world we inhabit. The revival in interest in pilgrimage in recent years is a sign of hope. The great river of humanity that constantly walks across Spain to the pilgrim city of Santiago de Compostella is just one sign of many across the globe of a stirring within the human spirit for mystical renewal and a life lived at pace with the earth and its rhythms.

Richard Frazer, November 2012.



www.greyfriarskirk.com

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www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=521