

SISTERS OF JESUS WAY

SPRING MESSAGE

2005



Easter 05

Our dear friends,

May the peace and joy of the Lord be with you this Eastertide.

None of us could have foreseen the vast spiritual family that is now one way or another linked to us. Many of you we know intimately because you have stayed with us often and shared your story with us. We have never had “associates” in a formal sense as in some ways this has not been needed; we have been aware that a family surrounded us, prayed for us and supported us in many ways. It is to you especially that this letter is addressed. We would like to share with you recent developments in our story.

We were conscious at our recent 25th anniversary that we had reached a watershed and that the Lord was calling us on. It was wonderful to give thanks to him for all his leadings over the past years. We celebrated the goodness of God, which has been truly amazing but we are not expected to live in the past! The disproportionate amount of time and effort that can go into anniversaries in churches sometimes concerns us. It is good to celebrate and to say “thank you” to the heavenly Father over and over again but we need to hold fast to the present and the future.

There was as we celebrated one question in particular that troubled us as we looked to the future and it revolved around the word “accountability”. It has become an “in” word but nevertheless we have seen some disastrous situations occur in both communities and fellowships when there has been no accountability. There have been particular dangers when leaders have become so to speak a law unto themselves.

As many of you know we began our life together as a community in the Methodist Church. We will forever be indebted to some of the “saints” in that denomination. Our formal ties gradually weakened over the years. The final severance came last year when a dear Methodist minister to whom we had voluntarily been “accountable” suddenly died. He had been alongside us since the birth of our community. Most communities have someone from outside themselves who is called a “visitor” and we were now left without anyone.

In the meanwhile about twelve years ago we quite literally drifted into St Mary’s, Upton, an evangelical Anglican Church. It began when a Swiss helper wanted to experience the kind of lively worship that had meant so much to her in her home country. We accompanied her. When she returned home we continued to worship at St.Mary’s. We have always been on the perimeter of church life because our own ministry here is all day, every day! One of the gifts to us at this Anglican Church was that they accepted that and in a quiet way supported us especially by their prayers. There were pointers along the way that we were in the will of God and in the right place. We are not suggesting that we have discovered the perfect church, any more than we are saying that they have the perfect community in their congregation! But we have rubbed along together for almost half of the twenty-five years that we have, through the grace of God, been in existence.

We have always felt that it was right for us to be in one or other of the historic denominations although we are more than sympathetic to the house churches and the independent fellowships to which many of you belong. Please forgive us spending so much time in this letter over what to you may be an irrelevancy. For us it is not the centre of our life and our thinking but it has come back to us in the light of what has recently happened that rumours have been flying around. We thought it would be wiser to set the record straight.

The danger for us of not being fully committed to either denomination or half committed to both was that at some future date we would find ourselves out on a limb. We believe that for us this would be a dangerous place to be because there would be no accountability. The word was writ large on our minds! Indeed our Methodist minister who was always there in the background also warned us of this danger. His unexpected departure to heaven concentrated our minds even more on the subject. We couldn’t see clearly the way ahead although we realised the need.

We are an established community if we can describe ourselves in this way so there was no crisis but for the sake of the future there needed to be answerability somewhere. Strange as it may sound, community life gives a profound understanding of human sinfulness; we are aware of our own fragility. The place of humility i.e. accepting God-given authority and correction if necessary is the safest place to be. Where and with whom was the question? As you know

we trust the Lord to provide for us in every way and all our difficulties, problems and perplexities are his so we didn't go rushing around looking for someone. He knew our need and that was sufficient.

He answered our prayers in an unexpected way. The diocesan Bishop came to a service where several of our sisters were present. This is quite a rare occurrence but it was God's timing. Seeing our sisters he suggested that he might visit us. We thought immediately, this is the person who will be able to help us if we tell him our difficulty.

Being quite ignorant of Anglicanism we thought that he might suggest a clergyman in the diocese who would be willing to act as a "visitor" to the community. We were surprised when he suggested himself and even more when he said that he would officiate at services that mark the various commitments we make. One of these services has already taken place. We have had great difficulty sometimes in the past finding clergy to officiate so we were (when we recovered from the shock) delighted. We respected him for the understanding he showed concerning community living. We were also moved by his compassion for our fragmented society, a compassion that we seek to share.

The Lord kept his hand on us as the day after the Bishop's visit, with much to think about, two sisters departed for Holy Island. The Anglican Franciscans are on the Island. Brother Damien is the vicar of St Mary the Virgin, a church we love dearly. He patiently answered our many questions. Others on the island who are members of scattered communities also gave us helpful advice. The timing was so perfect we could not doubt that for us God's hand was in it.

To regularise things we were confirmed into the Anglican Church in February at our own church. It meant a great deal to us that some of our dear Methodist friends came to the service. We are still on the journey to being recognised as a community in the Church of England and believe that God is with us on the journey.

For many years we have sought help from other religious communities usually Anglican when we have encountered problems that have been peculiar to communities, such as visas, tax and so on. Sometimes we have been passed from house to house on the telephone until we didn't know which community was helping us except that it was Brother X or Sister Y! Really, it did not matter because community is community wherever it is lived with the same joys and same difficulties. Informally we have already had links with some Anglican communities. As most of you know the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary has been a constant source of encouragement for us but they are a German Sisterhood and sometimes on practicalities we needed guidance from England! We know speaking even to some of our evangelical Anglican friends that community and especially so-called religious communities are another world and one of which they have no knowledge. This can create fear.

We are not blind either, to the difficulties that the Anglican Communion is in at this present time. At the same time we are aware that God has His "saints" in the Church of England as in every denomination. As a community we have to be anchored in one and the Lord has led us to the Anglican Church. In some ways we are as surprised as everyone else but we do not doubt that this has been God's guidance!

We hope however, that your anxieties are not rising about your dear sisters here. One friend said to us on the telephone, "You are not going to change, are you?" She was expressing what we know others have been thinking. The answer is that we will not. We are not about to be taken over! The Anglican Church is not employing us but simply advising us when we need it and giving us a place where we are, if we dare use the word again, "accountable"! We are grateful.

We will remain your sisters exactly as you know us now with our way of faith, trusting the heavenly Father for all our needs. The Lord Jesus is our Head and we follow his Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we become irresponsible and not accountable to others as well as to God. Church history is littered with tragic examples of those who have tried.

Our emphasis on holiness will still be the same; our love for the Lord Jesus we hope will grow stronger with each passing day. There will be the same laughter, singing and occasionally tears! The house and garden here will embrace you as always in the love and peace of God.

In some ways what has happened to us highlights the sin of our disunity; we are all Christian. Our dear spiritual family to whom we are writing this will always be from many different denominations and fellowships. We rejoice in that.

We remain, your own dear sisters, united with you in the Lord Jesus Christ,

The Sisters of Jesus Way.

