

What are 'Friends' for?

I write this to appear sometime in the week following Sunday 17th May 2020 – which had we been in ordinary times would have been the date of the AGM of the Friends of Truro Cathedral. We have missed one of those splendid meals provided by Marilyn and her team, who like many among those furloughed, remain in our thoughts and prayers, and we have missed also much of the opportunity to catch up on the Friends activities in the world of both raising funds, and then providing them. Information is though on the way in the shape of the annual report, and at this stage there is a little hope that some form of meeting might take place sometime in July, but only if that is considered a safe thing to do by then – watch this space.

Had we managed to meet - among other things - it would have been my 'swan song', as my tenure as Chairman of the Council has, in the surprisingly speedy world of passing time, come to the end of its three year stint. With that in mind I just wanted to take this opportunity to reflect with you on all of that, thinking about what has been achieved through the efforts of all concerned – not least of which are the generous donors - but also offering some thanks for the efforts of the Council and the very proper way they steward the funds given into their care.

It is always interesting for me to reflect that when Jesus set out to do what he would do; he did not set out on that journey alone. We know that he seems to have given some special status in his life to 12 particular companions, but there were others besides including a few different Marys and at least one Martha. With these people he shared companionship, a fair few meals, along with humour and many a conversation, but that was not where this friendship ends - and in reality that is probably not where our best friendships end either. Our friends are also those people who might just be prepared to tell us that we are making an idiot of ourselves, they might be able to say when we are falling short of the standards we ought to be setting ourselves – in seeking to speak the truth in love – they might be those who tell us that we have simply got it wrong. I think if you have seriously engaged with reading the Gospels you will recognise that this is something of what Jesus did among those he was closest to – it is also something of my own experience of chairing the Friends Council these past years.

I offer that as a positive rather than in any sense as a negative. In many ways Council is the place where Chapter and the Friends meet – Chapter charged with the responsibility for the mission of the Cathedral in all its breadth - and Council as custodian of funds raised to support Chapter in that mission. It is a meeting of 'grown ups', of two bodies of people both committed to a vision that sees Truro Cathedral, not only as a structure built from bricks and mortar, but as a place that both sustains – and at its best – transforms lives. Robust conversation then is a real part of that, and as the two bodies struggle to play out their mutual vision alongside their responsibilities, I completely accept that it is right and proper that this is the case. I thank Council therefore when the conversations have been hard as we have sought to come to a common mind and I do so grateful, that in a very real sense, we remained friends throughout.

But, you may ask, why don't the Friends Council simply do as Chapter asks on every occasion? My insight into that would be to consider the commitment that they have to being good stewards of all that is handed to their care - and if we wanted to get biblical again - I would point you to the story of the 'widows mite' (Mark 12.41-44) which is a story that I believe Council takes seriously. Interpreting that further they hand out money knowing that the last £5 of it might have been all that a person had – and that despite that - they chose to give that last £5 to Truro Cathedral and its wider mission. Spending is therefore a real responsibility and one the Council, in my experience of it, always takes very seriously indeed – and I can only commend them for that.

That said, this does not mean that they have been either reluctant to spend or in any sense 'Scrooge like' in my tenure. In fact, over these past three years their efforts - and the efforts of their donors - have gifted just over £202,000 to Chapter and their work.

Perhaps, a breakdown of that might be good – so I offer the below

- Renewal of the Cathedral Toilets 2018/2019 - £127,999 - even now some of those on Council would tell me that these are less than perfect, expressing as they do so more of that perpetual commitment to their good stewardship. They are probably not – but they are still pretty darned good - and unrecognisable from what they were.

- South Porch netting March 2018 - £3,500
This was a means to prevent pigeons nesting in the porch and the natural consequences that result from that nesting, for those who then have to walk through it.
- CCTV July 2019 - £1,612
We are a big public space that anyone can enter - and that is a very important foundation stone of our mission. This simply upgraded cameras that help in keeping staff and volunteers safe as we deal daily with the joys – and sometimes challenges – of responding to the people who take up the invitation and come in.
- Narthex Mats October 2019 - £578
Encouraged to supply these by our Lay Assistants, they very simply prevent slips and trips for those coming into the building in wet weather.
- Car Park December 2019 - £24,195
I have joked with people that we were on the verge of launching guided tours around some of the more impressive pot-holes in the car park. This project did not simply fill them in, but renewed the main car park, as to make it unrecognisable from before. It is a massive amount safer for all who use it too.

I will spend a little more time on the final donation because it is somewhat unusual. All the above, obviously provide something physical and tangible that improves the fabric of the Cathedral for those who use it. The final, and most recent donation does not, but nevertheless I would like to express Chapter's sincere gratitude for the £38,000 recently given.

Like any other business, institution or charity, there are clear and obvious consequences to the 'lockdown' recently rightly imposed upon the nation in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. With the Cathedral closed, income from both shop and restaurant are lost, donations from visitors are not made and additional income arising from Cathedral events is not received, as these events are cancelled. We realise of course that we are not alone or unique in seeking to survive financially in the face of this and behind the scenes those staff who have not been furloughed, have been working hard to address this as best we can. One thing we did do was to ask the Friends if they might help, and over a couple of days a long, interesting and good-humoured cyber world debate, took place among Council members who, like everyone else these days, could not physically meet. As ever when it comes to a final vote those of us who sit on Council who belong to Chapter abstain – expressing their obvious conflict of interest by doing so. Beyond them the Council, was in the end unanimous in granting the £38,000 - which saving their own retention of funds policy - represents that balance of what they then held.

There will not be a plaque commemorating this donation, ever attached to anything physical. It will help though, alongside the government scheme, in our sustaining the lives of some of our staff as we look for better and safer days to return – it also helps for now, to keep us from a cash-flow crisis. On behalf of Chapter I thank the Friends for it. It is a big help but far from resolves everything we currently face so please continue to hold us in your thoughts and prayers.

In all of this time, I have enjoyed my tenure as the Chairman of the Friends Council. I am particularly grateful to Mary Prior as secretary who has done all she could to organise me and Martin Welton our treasurer for efficiently doing the sums – I thank them alongside all the other members of Council who have shared the table, real and virtual, with us. Great thanks, also of course, goes to the fundraising team for all their efforts and to all those who have donated through their events, or in any other way, - without you we would through this time have had far less to argue and agree about. Finally, thanks to the efforts of Pam Miller as our membership secretary for signing up new recruits to the cause.

Adam Starr – is predicted to take the Chair – I hope his time is as blessed as I feel mine has been.

With every good wish

Alan Bashforth – Canon Chancellor – Chairman of Friends (almost retired).