

## **Whipsnade Tree Cathedral – Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary – 6.30 pm – 24.6.13**

**For the beauty of the earth  
For the beauty of the skies  
For the love which from our birth  
Over and around us lies  
Lord of all, to thee we raise  
This our grateful hymn of praise.**

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What a year 1953 was! New peaks conquered and ascended; the previously unclimbed, climbed; along with that crowning moment; that inauguration of a new reign of dedicated service and duty; that rejoicing across the land – and that was just the founding of the Bedfordshire Rural Community Council! Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity as we know it today.

Sixty years on – in this year of Diamond Jubilee of our Queen's Coronation and the conquering of Everest – we celebrate and give thanks for sixty years of dedication and service by BRCC to our County; sixty years of supporting people and communities who live and work in rural Bedfordshire.

Tonight - a time of Jubilee. A year of Jubilee – an anniversary of rejoicing; a celebration in which to shout for joy! Joy for what has been – the resourcing, enabling and equipping of the rural communities of this county through the contribution of staff and volunteers down the decades; joy for what is – the wide and diverse contribution through project and service that is all the more vital, and challenging to deliver, in these straightened

times; the joy of what will be – that vision of strong, green, thriving, aspiring and inclusive communities. A time of Jubilee indeed!

At the heart of that joy – that celebration – the invitation to awe and wonder. Rural communities as we know well are more than just rolling, beautiful countryside – the empty brick pits and the vents that mark landfill sites remind us of that – but that natural setting is God’s reminder that creation is good and demands our praise.

For the beauty of the earth  
For the beauty of the skies  
For the love which from our birth  
Over and around us lies  
Lord of all, to thee we raise  
This our grateful hymn of praise.

Awe and wonder – our grateful hymn of praise - prompted by the majestic trees of this natural Cathedral – trees planted by Edmund Blyth because of his inspiration by the sun shining through trees as he journeyed back from Liverpool. Let them lift your gaze to the heavens; let them call you, what-ever your faith, to praise; let them instil in you that sense of the holy that calls us to reach beyond ourselves in joy; and to serve each other in humble loving service – that spirit of service that is at heart of BRCC. Today a jubilee of joy; a jubilee of wonder!

But there is another tradition of Jubilee rooted in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Amidst all the requirements of

the Law there is that spirit of justice and sustainability – every seven years there is a be a fallow year; and then after seven sets of seven there is to be a year of Jubilee – a year in which each person will return to his land, in which bonded labourers will be set free, and debts will be wiped out.

Rooted in an understanding of humanity as stewards of God's creation – we are his tenants; in a commitment to the well-being of the whole community, ensuring no one is permanently oppressed; and in an understanding of the need to nurture and sustain the land the Jubilee year is a time of refreshment and restoration. It is the spirit that inspired Jubilee 2000 and the concern to write off the crippling debts that trap our poorer nations.

The importance of Jubilee is not whether or not it can be implemented – there is scholarly doubt whether it was ever really enacted. But rather it places before us that Jubilee justice that is so important for the flourishing of our rural life.

Rural life has so much going for it, but rural communities are where fuel poverty is greater; where for some transport is a disabling challenge; where poverty is real but dispersed and therefore often unseen; where 15% of children live in households below the poverty threshold; where many are forced out by housing costs.

This Tree Cathedral rooted in the injustices and divisions of the First World War and Edmund Blyth's desire to commemorate fallen comrades by a place of reconciliation,

faith and hope is a fitting place to hear once more this call to rural justice and to celebrate the contribution of BRCC both past and present; to celebrate Wheels2Work, the Community Transport Brokerage and all that connects people; to celebrate the place of community buildings not least village halls – and also don't forget what our parishes can offer as centres of local life; to celebrate all that is done to enable people to have new skills.

In an age of financial austerity; of planning change; of localism and local decision making; of welfare change; and changing family patterns we must not lose that Jubilee theme of justice.

A Jubilee of Joy; a Jubilee of Justice; a Jubilee of Jingle

In Hebrew the root of the word Jubilee comes from that word for Ram or Ram's horn. It is a time to sound the trumpet. To blow the horn! The Old Testament Jubilee is announced with the blowing of the trumpet throughout the land.

1953 was a special year and in part because BRCC came into being. For that we give thanks in awe and wonder - our Jubilee of Joy! For that and sixty years of contribution to the wellbeing justice and development of our rural communities – for its championing of vibrant rural life we give thanks and make our commitment to the future – our Jubilee of Justice.

For all of that and more may the trumpets sound – our Jubilee Jingle of Jubilation.