

Sermon for the Installation Service on the 75th anniversary of GAPAN, 2004...

Congratulations to the Guild on this celebration of its 75th anniversary! We are very young as a Guild. Why, when GAPAN was founded Sir Arthur Marshall was already twenty-six! The actual decision to form the Guild was taken in Rules, restaurant – the oldest restaurant in London. I happened to be in there for lunch a couple of weeks ago, but saw no aeroplanes. Rules is now the favourite haunt of actors and theatrical types – who do not in the least resemble air pilots and navigators who are, of course, models of reticence, shyness and restraint. But a 75th anniversary is a good opportunity to ask what is a guild *for*?

It is of course to develop, nurture and prosper a particular art and skill and to encourage and muster as much creativity and technical expertise as possible. But a guild is more than that. It is an institution. And institutions are living organisms with a soul and with a purpose. The main purpose of any guild is friendship. Well, we are used to the awful fact that the word “love” is debased in modern society – so that it is widely understood to be only what the rutting stag knows, or what the rutting celeb-get-me-out-of here knows. But “friendship” too has been cheapened. Like junk food it has been made instant. I saw an advert by a holiday company:

Do you wish to travel on your own without being alone? A Small World holiday is designed for YOU...Our house parties will welcome you as a friend rather than a paying guest...Everyone is on first name terms from day one...

Well I'd rather go and live in the desert than suffer the infliction of instant intimacy, care of Small World holidays. But it's the same when you're on the phone. Everybody in the Electricity Company, the Gas Company and Lloyds Bank calls me “Peter”. No, I exaggerate: some call me “Pete” – not that I've ever met any one of them. What many call a friend these days is just someone they meet by accident in the pub; or someone they pass on the street on the way to work in the morning. But these are not friendships.

A real friend is, as St Augustine put it, *your other self*. And friendship is a kind of love. Remember the Old Testament stories of those friends David and Jonathan: their friendship described as *passing the love of women*. When I think of a true friend, I remember what Samuel Coleridge did for William Wordsworth. Coleridge was working in a good job in Malta when Wordsworth asked him urgently to come back to England to read Wordsworth's new long poem *The Prelude*. Coleridge did return. Listened to Wordsworth read the poem from start to finish. Then sat up all night and wrote a commentary on it – praising it to the skies. Moreover, Coleridge's commentary was itself a poem. Was Willie Wordsworth pleased? Well, he had a funny way of showing it. He would not give Coleridge permission to publish his commentary.

Is there anything worse than a friendship broken and betrayed? A few years later, Coleridge was far gone into his opium habit. Wordsworth wrote to the people who were supporting Coleridge and told them not to, saying, *Nothing good will ever come of him*. A rich man offered to take Coleridge to London and look after him. They stopped the coach in Grasmere to collect luggage. This nicely gave Wordsworth opportunity to warn Coleridge's benefactor that Coleridge was a waster and a ne'er do

well. Is there anything makes us angrier than that sort of betrayal? And now as we approach the most solemn part of the Christian year, we think of the ultimate betrayal when the Son of God was sold to his enemies by one of his best friends. So we see that friendship is not trivial. It is not second best to romantic love. Friendship is perhaps the deepest attachment of which we are capable. As Euripedes said, *One loyal friend is worth 10,000 relatives.*

No friendship can exist in a vacuum. We find our friends in the institutions to which we belong. As water makes fishes possible, so an institution makes friendships possible. Water is an element. And institutions are elemental. We say of a man who is happy among his friends, *He's in his element.* Specifically, we find friendship in this Guild. Again the trendy modern, politically-correct climate sneers at our sort of friendship. Those modern levellers, consumed with the politics of envy, despise mutual help and dismiss it as *the Old Boys' Network* – something else they wish to do away with. But against this hideous political-correctness, let us ask whom do we really trust with what is ultimately important to us – with our confidences and secrets, with our plans and property, with our intimate concerns and problems? Not the counsellor, the psychoanalyst, the government officer or the social engineer. We trust our friends. And we are right to do so. Let me answer the politics of envy plainly: *There can be nothing wrong with helping your friend.*

But friendship must be based on honesty. You can say what you like to a real friend. You can also take what he has to say to you – even when it's a rebuke. Friendships can stand criticism, stand a joke. Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis teased each other endlessly. So did Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. And then there was Evelyn Waugh. He used to spend most of his days in White's Club, seeking literary inspiration from whisky at the bar. His great friend and sparring partner was Randolph Churchill. One day Waugh went into White's and Churchill wasn't on his usual bar stool. Waugh asked after him. The steward said, *He's in hospital. A growth in his stomach. But it's all right. They've taken it out. It wasn't malignant.*

Waugh sighed and said, *Truly modern science is wonderful. Fancy being able to find the only bit of Randolph Churchill that is not malignant – and remove it!*

Our friendships are for comradeship, for solidarity, for mutual society, help and comfort and for fun. Friendship is also a high vocation with a deep moral purpose. Friends exist to bring out the best in each other and to lead each other towards the good. My friend should also be my hero. He is my other self. And as I care for the good of my own soul, I care for him.

Above all, friendship is sacred. It is something to be treated with awe and something like holy fear. For your friend, however close, is *other* – a person in his own being. And persons must never be treated as means to an end, but as ends in themselves. We should love our friends with the same sort of deeply respectful love as the love we try to have for God himself. Exactly. Remember, Moses was called *the friend of God.* Even so, God said to Moses *Take off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the ground whereon thou standest is holy ground.*

Let us give thanks therefore for 75 years of our Guild which gives us friendship's holy ground.