

## **PILGRIMAGE**

### **Pilgrim's Progress**

Each of us in this room is a pilgrim on a journey. We are on pilgrimage and, being a pilgrim, we wear a badge – that of the Cross, made on our foreheads at baptism. We might add that for most of us, our parents, guardians, godparents made that choice for us – they took on responsibility for us. So, our Christian journey began then – others made that choice.

Thinking in terms of choice, Thomas Merton in his early biography *'The Seven Storey Mountain'* sees himself as a wanderer endlessly searching for something new, trying new roles, new places, new experiences. There is nothing new, this endless searching.

Think again of the choices facing us: our consumer society; the choices which can sweep us off our feet; TV commercials and advertising; the choices we mull over, say, in choosing a school for the children, in buying a car, in decorating a room, arranging holidays – do we go to Wales or Tenerife?

How grown up are we? To quote Rowan Williams: *'Whoever has matured, as a person not as an individual, is the person who thinks least about choice. Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Could he have fled? Did he really have to face the same kind of agony that we might face in a similar situation? In our understanding, he could have made a different choice. But there was also a deeper sense in which he had no option. The choice to betray would have been a violation of everything that he was, a tearing of the very fabric of his being – and if Judas had not chosen to betray.....'*

Each of you has been commissioned. You, we, are on the Pilgrim Way and we each follow the Way of the Lord because he is the Way, the Truth and the Life – *'I will go before you into Galilee...'*

Christina Baxter said, *'I have no authority of my own but I am accompanied in this journey of holiness by the one to whom all authority is committed – "I am with you always to the end of the age"'. Jesus, whose authority we do not question is beside us as we engage in the work of making disciples and helping people to live under the rule of God'. (from 'The Wounds of Jesus').*

So we make our choice – the foundation is baptism. Another quote comes from an Egyptian desert father, Abba John the Dwarf: *'you don't build a house by beginning with the roof and working down; you begin with the foundation ... the foundation is our neighbour whom we must win. That is the place to begin to find God'*. And from Esther de Waal: *'Love is the foundation to which we return all the time, familiar yet ever new'*. Every commandment of Christ depends on this one.

We think of pilgrimage as 'going out' – of travelling on the Pilgrim Way. Tom Wright's *'The Way of the Lord'* is about pilgrimage. *'We are called to discover the other side of pilgrimage: not only to go somewhere else to find God in a new way, but to go somewhere else in order to bring God in a new way to that place where we are – by our own presence, our grief, our sympathy, our encouragement, our prayer. We go to meet Jesus afresh, to share his pain, to pray and to work for the victory he won on the cross to be implemented – for his way to be followed – in the Holy Land and in our own environment'*.

We are called not to a private pursuit. I read somewhere that church going is classified as a hobby or interest – as though the only purpose is to cultivate our own holiness and salvation. Although this is necessary, on its own it is the wrong direction. Jesus calls us to share in his

work of drawing out and dealing with the evil of the world. We are called therefore to claim the Cross-as the victory which under-girds all our work for God.

Meeting God is never a chance happening – it's a constant repetition of that on-going call to prayer and service, and *'the prayer of tomorrow is the prayer you make today. What you do tomorrow depends on what you do and are, today. What you plan to eat tomorrow depends, usually, on what you do about it today'*. It means that boring thing called 'faithfulness', being ready. Think of yourselves as being of the Emergency Services!

The places we view as places of pilgrimage may be viewed as places where a saint or holy person once lived and died – Iona; Lindisfarne; Medjugorje; Walsingham; our great cathedrals; Canterbury; Durham ...the list is endless ...and, above all, the country where Jesus himself once walked and talked; where he was born; where he lived, died, rose again. These places may be seen as effective signs of his love and presence.

*Tom Wright:*

*But the supreme example, in my own life, came on my first visit to the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It was 1989. The Arab Intifada, the uprising against the Israeli rulers, was at its height. I flew to Israel. I flew to Israel on Palm Sunday, and spent two or three days settling in, finding my bearings, getting to know how things worked. I deliberately did not go to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the church built over and around the site of Calvary, until Good Friday, when I joined an early morning party walking the Stations of the Cross. I wanted my first visit to the church to be in context of appropriate worship, not as a tourist. I had been warned, of course, of the two obvious evils, which cluster in that remarkable place: competition between different denominations, and commercialization of everything in sight. They were in full evidence. Indeed, as I was standing in contemplation before the very place where Jesus was crucified, I found myself elbowed out of the way by a posse of young Armenian monks, intent on their proper turn to sing an office. But I found a corner of the building with a side chapel which seemed quiet, away from the noise and bustle, and stayed there all morning.*

*And as I thought and prayed in that spot, a few yards from the place where Jesus died, I found that somehow, in a way I still find difficult to describe, all the pain of the world seemed to be gathered there. In the previous days, I had seen and heard on the street the anger and pain of the Palestinians. I had seen on other streets the paranoia and painful memories of the Israelis. The very Armenians who had invaded my space carried their own memories of their own genocide, all the worse for being virtually voiceless. So much pain; so many ugly memories; so much anger and frustration and bitterness and sheer human misery. And it was all somehow concentrated on that one spot. And then, as I continued to reflect and pray, the hurts and pains of my own life came up for review, and they too all seemed to be gathered together with clarity and force in that one place. It was a moment – actually, two or three hours – of great intensity, in which the presence of Jesus the Messiah, at the place where the pain of the world was concentrated, became more and more the central reality. I emerged eventually into the bright sunlight, feeling as though I had been rinsed out spiritually and emotionally, and understanding – or at least glimpsing – in a new way what it could mean to suppose that one act in one place at one time could somehow draw together the hopes and fears of all the years. I had become a pilgrim.'*

If we visit these places in a secular or rationalistic way, we will find nothing unusual. It might be like being on holiday where nothing is right and we come away grumbling – the weather; the commercialisation; the inadequate or expensive toilet facilities; the prices (coffee) and the crowds (pushing, shoving). But if we go humbly, get down beneath the surface irritations and wait...on God...in the silence of our hearts, in our poverty and need there is no telling what we may hear, or discover, and in what ways we might be changed.

How do we stay with ourselves therefore? This staying with ourselves depends totally on staying with Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The disciples on the road to Emmaus when they invited an unknown stranger into their home – their invitation ‘*Stay with us Lord for it is towards evening*’... ‘*Jesus has given us our wayfaring food in the sacrament of unity which binds us to him and each other.*’ (Johann Arndt, a Lutheran).

Holiness, you know, is very prosaic; it consists in doing the next thing. In the main, the ordinary thing of life are always there: eating; sleeping; odd jobs at home; taking the children to school; putting out the wheelie bin. To follow this advice we are on the way to self-acceptance; fidelity in our daily lives, family, partnerships, and fidelity in prayer. the opposite is to want to be elsewhere; to transfer one’s circumstances; to be in control.

Pilgrimage to holy places can be a stimulus – an invitation to prayer; to take fresh steps along the road of discipleship that leads from this earthy city to the City that is to come. Saul of Tarsus met his true destination while going in the opposite direction and with a completely different purpose: that of arresting Christians and bringing them back in chains to Jerusalem.

Here is a poem by John Betjamen about St Paul and conversion:

*‘Saint Paul is often criticised  
by modern people who’re annoyed  
at his conversion, saying Freud  
explains it all. But they omit  
the really vital point of it,  
which isn’t how it was achieved,  
but what it was that Paul believed.*

*What is conversion? Not at all  
for me the experience of St Paul,  
no blinding light, a fitful glow  
is all the light of faith I know  
which sometimes goes completely out  
and leaves me plunging round in doubt  
until I will myself to go  
and worship in God’s house below-  
my parish church – and even there  
I find distractions everywhere.*

*What is conversion? Turning round  
to gaze upon a love profound.  
for some of us see Jesus plain  
and never once look back again,  
and some of us have seen and known  
and turned and gone away alone.*

*But most of us turn slow to see  
The figure hanging on a tree  
and stumble on and blindly grope  
upheld by intermittent hope.  
God grant before we die we all  
may see the light as did St Paul.’*

We are each called to holiness. Remember Isaiah’s vision (Isaiah 6), his experience of the Holiness of God and his resulting sense of sinfulness, of smallness in the presence of the Holy One; his mission in the power and forgiveness of God. St Paul was blinded and helpless –

and his mission. I'm reading Act of the Apostles and his indomitable faithfulness in spite of huge difficulties – *rooted and ground in Christ*.

Our task is to present the holiness of God but our primary task is to make room for holiness in our lives by looking at the Father as Isaiah did. Remember his call ... and his sense of sin. Then, '*who will go for us? Send me.*' He caught that spark, that vision, and his vocation – and ours – is to pray that we may catch that vision, that spark and pass it on ... to let people see in us some tiny glimpse. The disciples' calling: to pass on their vision of Jesus; to witness to him – and that is our vocation, too and is likely to have led you to where you are now.

What kind of witness is being presented to the Church today? And what kind of witness has the Church of God given in the past?

St Benedict too caught that sense of holiness, which was in direct contrast to the evils, and lack of morality of his time. He looked to permanent values then applied the Gospel to everything he began to do. We too are called to be the Body of Christ in an ever-increasing permissive and secular world.

Total risk? Jesus risked himself into the hands of humankind.

Somehow, we want to please ourselves, to please others. In our heart of hearts, we do each aim to live the Gospel and we try not to compromise. We hate to be different, and so compromise. The odd and interesting fact is that the world, and the media which portrays the world's thinking, sees the compromise. The Church and her leaders are ridiculed and pulled to pieces – ruined reputation and huge sums of money to try to compensate. No pity. Think of those who are judged by the media when they are perceived as not living up to their reputation.

On the other hand, some believe that we as committed persons can be a help. There is trust; we receive confidences; it is believed that we will listen and will remember; that we will be sympathetic. The big danger is that we can step outside our authority – judgementalism; sectarianism, ambition raises its head.

God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself – the shameful cross became the instrument of salvation, the source of new life. Loving like Jesus procures the salvation of the world. We are faced with the realism of living with others; the pain of seeing things wasted; opportunity wasted and destroyed; lack of progress; a going backwards. And this always brings us back to the Cross.

*'The Church does not have a magic wand to banish all ills at one stroke. It holds up the cross. The answer is that God does have the answer. God made himself on Calvary – to the strident anger of the world – the silent answer of suffering love.'*

*(‘The Crown and the Fire’ by N T Wright)*

The foolishness of the Cross is the wisdom which brings peace.

We wear that badge on our foreheads.