

Pilgrims

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers at the 8am and 10am services at St Peter's Wolvercote on 25th July 2010, the Feast of St James the Apostle

According to the tradition of the Church – almost certainly not true – St James managed to fit in a visit to Spain during his lifetime. And then, more possible but still highly unlikely, his body was supposed to have been taken to Spain after his death. Certainly some relics were discovered there in the 9th century, and around them grew up the great shrine of Santiago di Compostela, to which pilgrims flocked in the late Middle Ages.

St James is often depicted in art as a pilgrim with a scallop shell. Scallop shells are very common in Northern Spain, and the tradition developed that pilgrims would bring one back as a reminder of their pilgrimage. In 1986 a body was uncovered in Worcester Cathedral, complete with staff, stout boots and scallop shell – a medieval pilgrim to Compostela. The shell with its converging lines symbolised the different routes pilgrims took to get to the shrine. And of course wearing it was a reminder that they were pilgrims, journeying with God and towards God.

After the Reformation, pilgrimage took a downturn, certainly in this country. The great shrines of Thomas-à-Becket at Canterbury and the Blessed Virgin Mary at Walsingham were suppressed. But it is interesting that in the 20th century, places of pilgrimage have been re-established and re-vitalised: Iona, Walsingham, the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. All attract significant numbers of pilgrims once again. When I worked as a pastoral assistant in an inner city parish in Notting Hill in the 1980s, the parish would go to Walsingham every summer for a week's pilgrimage and parish holiday. Though the shrine was a bit high for my tastes, I still remember it as a special place where people were able to make connections with God, with each other, with a higher source of healing and strength, to help them cope with the often tortuous vagaries of their lives.

I want to reflect a little today on the experience of being a pilgrim. To do so, I want to read you a short passage from a book by David Adam. David is an Anglican clergyman, now retired, who has played a key part in re-awakening awareness of the Celtic tradition of Christianity in this country – the Christianity which existed in these islands long before St Augustine was sent here by Pope Gregory in 597. David has written a number of books of prayers in the Celtic tradition - earthy prayers, practical, and deeply aware of the presence of God in the ordinary and everyday.

For 13 years from 1990, David was Vicar of Holy Island, Lindisfarne. In that time he welcomed over one million visitors, some on holiday, some day-trippers, some on pilgrimage, perhaps many not quite sure whether they were tourist or pilgrim.

The passage I'm going to read you is from a book he wrote based on his experiences on Lindisfarne, called 'The Road of Life'. I'll then draw out some things from it:

I believe we all need to find our own 'Holy Island', a place that is special and important to us. We should seek this place until we find it, though I do believe it can be of the heart and carried within us. It will be this quest and awareness that will distinguish a pilgrim from a

traveller. Our pilgrim journey is not only measured in miles but takes us into the depths of our being and the mystery of creation. We are not just surface travellers; we are seeking to enter great deeps. We travel with and in God. Actually everyone does, but I am talking of awareness, no matter how tenuous it is. As pilgrims, we are seeking to extend our awareness and our love for God and for all of his creation. The road of life is a journey into love and into God and if we miss out on this we have lost our way.

(David Adam, The Road of Life, pp xiv-xv, SPCK 2004)

One of the things which struck me in this passage is the idea that we don't necessarily have to travel to the ends of the country or overseas to be pilgrims. If we can go to Compostela, Assisi, Jerusalem, Holy Island, that's great, and it's well worth doing that at least once in our lives. But we're not always in a position to do that, and David Adam is saying that it's not crucial either.

The important thing is to find our own 'Holy Island', and that could be as close as our garden or a favourite walk or a relaxing armchair. Elsewhere in the book, David Adam talks about 'armchair pilgrims' – and in the passage I read, he said that our Holy Island 'can be of the heart and carried within us.'

So the question for each of us is where is our Holy Island? How and where do I, can I, connect with God? Just think about that for a moment – a special place or particular activity which links you to God..... Between us, we'd come up with a myriad of answers. Just this week, two different people mentioned feeling close to God in creation, especially during early morning walks, and the other person through gardening. When I want to be still at home to pray or read or write a sermon, I have a place I sit on the settee in my study – always for some reason, the right hand end! And over the years I've found particular pieces of music which I feel lift me into God's presence: Tallis' Spem in Alium; Barber's Adagio for Strings, and just recently, something quite different: when I was on retreat, I listened again and again to Snow Patrol's song Chasing Cars, and felt a deep stillness and connectedness through that.

But for you it might not be a place or music. It might be a person or a book or a film or a picture or cooking or Bible study or Communion or silence. Whatever it is, it is the pearl of great price, the treasure in the field which is worth seeking out time and time again, because it is that which connects us to the divine mystery, and in David Adam's words, 'takes us into the depths of our being and the mystery of creation.' He is encouraging us not to neglect to find our Holy Island, whatever it is, and to return there frequently.

Another key word David Adam uses in the passage I read is 'awareness'. 'As pilgrims,' he says, 'we are seeking to extend our awareness and our love for God and for all his creation.' I don't often travel by train; I probably ought to more often. When I do, it is, as for all of us, the practical means of getting from A to B, and I don't think much about it,unless things go wrong, in which case it becomes a source of annoyance and frustration. But six years ago I visited Sri Lanka with a group from Keble College as guests of the Church there. One trip was from Colombo up into the hill country. We could have gone in our minibus, but some of us opted to go by train. It took all day; it was leisurely, relaxing and intensely beautiful. There was something in that trip about enjoying the present moment, enjoying the scenery, enjoying just sitting, reflecting, reading – and being thankful for that. It was more than simply a means of getting from A to B. I was journeying not just as a traveller, but as a pilgrim – with an awareness of God's presence and with deep gratitude for that.

I think this is what David Adam means by ‘awareness’, which he sees as the hallmark of the pilgrim rather than the traveller. We can travel through life, heads down, intent on getting from A to B, intent on getting this job done or that list ticked off. I’m like that myself 95% of the time and sometimes we have to be like that. But the pilgrim is trying to cultivate a different way of travelling, in which they have their heads up and their eyes open, their ears straining for hints and whispers of God, the love of God, the beauty of God around them. I envy those who can do that well, and they are usually marked by stillness, thankfulness and grace. They still journey from A to B, they can still get the important jobs done, but they do so with that added extra, ‘awareness’.

How do we cultivate it? Finding our Holy Island and returning there frequently is part of it. As David Adam says elsewhere in his book: ‘I believe that we rarely discover that the world is a holy place until we have found one holy place. Once we find one holy place, there is a chance for all to become holy’ (p.9). But as well as a holy place or holy activity or holy music or holy whatever to connect us when we have time, perhaps we can also cultivate awareness by building triggers into our ordinary lives – quick, simple thoughts, words, actions, which make us aware of the holy in the ordinary. For instance:

- ancient , tried and trusted: grace before meals: not necessarily spoken out loud, but said quietly to ourselves: ‘thankyou, Lord, for the good gifts of your creation.’
- at the sound of an ambulance siren, a prayer to commit those involved to God: ‘may your love sustain, hold and heal.’
- as we knock on the door to visit someone: ‘Father, bless all who live in this house.’
- before a difficult meeting:’ into your hands, Lord.’
- a wooden cross in our purse or pocket, which reminds us of Christ’s love for us when we touch it.
- or something someone recently told me they do: a reminder message on their computer or mobile phone coming up every two hours: ‘PAUSE’. Then they take a moment – 30 seconds – to stop, give thanks, become aware, acknowledge God.

These are modern versions of scallop shell badges – ways of reminding us that we don’t have to be just travellers through life, but can be pilgrims, cultivating an awareness of God in our day to day lives.

So God’s call to us, as David Adam expresses it, is to journey at a deeper level; to find and frequently revisit our Holy Island; and to journey with heads up and senses alert, more aware of God’s presence at our side, his arm around our shoulders. Amen.