

'Pass on Peacefully, Longing for Home'

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All of our life is a journey, a pilgrimage, from the time we are born until the time we die and beyond. Human beings have always been on the move, whether singly or in groups, searching and searching for that which is over the next hill, or beyond the mountains or over the horizon. Our journey as *homo sapiens* has taken us from our probable origins in the continent of Africa through the Middle East and beyond to the furthest limits of Europe, Asia and the Americas. Along the way we have created places: caves, temples, sacred groves and trees, that speak of the divine and of our human longings for food, for space to live well, for fulfilling human relationships.

Years ago in Jerusalem, I was given some wise advice during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land: "There are no sacred places in Judaism or Christianity, there are only sacred events to which the 'holy places' bear witness and to which we travel to touch the continuing power and grace of those sacred events". So the outward physical journey of the body in pilgrimage is, or should be, mirrored by the inner journey of the mind, the spirit and the heart: "the journey into the self is the journey home to God" (St. Augustine).

Basically, the journey, the pilgrimage, is made not just for its own sake but out of a longing, an expectation, of inner transformation. As Daniel O'Leary in his book *Travelling Light* puts it, "It is God that does the transforming, all we have to do is show up and start walking".

Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition we find many varieties of pilgrimage which can illuminate the different ways of our own spiritual journeys beginning with the journey into exile of Adam and Eve who, having walked in the garden with their Creator, become homeless and strangers in the world that was created for them as they continually search for the way to return home.

In the figure of Abraham we are called by God to leave the homeland and the familiar to become nomads, travelling with faith in the promises of God. The archetypal pilgrim experience of the people of God is ever recalled in the Hebrew Passover and the Paschal festival of Easter with its themes of escape and protection on the journey: the presence of God made known in mountain-top and desert experiences, fire and cloud, ark and covenant. A journey where the going is so often through difficult terrain but where God never abandons his people and there is a promised land at the end.

Three times a year at the pilgrim feasts of Unleavened Bread, Weeks and the Ingathering of the Harvest the Hebrews were called to come to Jerusalem to renew their commitment to live in covenant with God and to live in God's justice with others. Psalms 120-134, frequently used in the daily prayer of Christian communities, have their origin as pilgrim songs on the journey from earth to heaven, from curse to blessing, from judgement to salvation, expressed through prayer and praise, confession and complaint, trial and trust. Building on this lived experience are the prophets (for example Isaiah 60-66) as they promise and long for the coming of the Messiah, have visions of the whole earth and all its peoples streaming towards God's mountain on pilgrimage.

When we move into the world of the New Testament, especially the Gospels, we find ourselves surrounded by familiar scriptural images of pilgrimage centred on Jesus of Nazareth who is the archetypal pilgrim; indeed he is God's pilgrim travelling the journey of new creation and salvation. Jesus is the Son of Man and Son of God; he is the new Adam identifying with God's people in exile, having nowhere to lay his head. He is also the fulfiller of Abrahamic faith obedient to the call of God. He comes out of Egypt and, like the Hebrews of old, he too encounters God on the mountain-top and in the desert; he is the fulfiller of the new covenant. Jesus goes

regularly on pilgrimage from childhood onwards to the holy city of Jerusalem - a pilgrimage which reaches its climax in his final Passover pilgrimage where he achieves his Exodus through the sufferings of his passion, his death on the cross and the triumph of his resurrection. Jesus Christ the messiah, above all when he is lifted up on the cross, draws all people to himself.

The rest of the New Testament is the story of the pilgrimage which takes the new people of God from Jerusalem to Rome, the earthly centre, and beyond to the heavenly centre of the new Jerusalem, the city of God coming down out of heaven. As the author of Hebrews states, "You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (Heb.12.22).

Throughout Christian history, pilgrimages have been made, whether physically or spiritually as in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Douglas Vest in his book *On Pilgrimage*, gives us a useful summary of the process of making a traditional Christian pilgrimage:- first, the pilgrim sets a goal for him or herself to go to a particular place connected with a holy person or event or signs of the divine; second, the pilgrim prepares for the journey. In the Middle Ages this included amongst the more spiritual items, the mending of broken relationships, settling debts and drawing up a will - after all there was a good chance you might not return!

The pilgrim set off at a favourable time and tried always to travel in company with others. The journey was normally made on foot, that is with simplicity and humility (from 'humus', earth) and lacking earthly power. At one or more points there would be the importance of crossing some kind of 'threshold' to encounter the holy - a 'liminal' experience. When pilgrims reached their destination there was always a ritual process to be celebrated: honouring relics, drinking holy water, receiving blessings or sacraments, giving alms to the poor. In return, the guardians of the holy place would give some badge or mark to show that the pilgrims had performed penance and reached their goal. The final stage was the homecoming. The pilgrim returns as a new person, one who has made the journey of faith and conversion, one who has touched and been touched by the sacred.

A favourite phrase of Francis of Assisi in his prayers and writings was the call to "walk in the footprints of Jesus". His own spiritual journey took him from his birthplace (although he always returned to it) to Rome and Egypt and by tradition also to the Holy Land and to Compostella. In his Rule he, like Clare, refers to his followers as, "pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility; let them go seeking alms with confidence" (Later Rule 6.1-2). "And so they went through the world as pilgrims and strangers, taking with them nothing but the Christ crucified" (Little Flowers 5). One of the most beautiful expressions of Francis' desire for the pilgrim life comes in Bonaventure's Major Legend 7.2 "It was part of a pilgrim's life to shelter under another's roof, and pass on peacefully, longing for home".

In that simple phrase, we see the many elements of pilgrimage: human, other faiths, Jewish and Christian, woven together with typical elements of Francis' vocation; dependence on others in poverty and humility, to travel in life as a bringer and creator of peace, to recognise our true home in God and Jesus Christ and to long for it with all our heart.

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