

Pilgrimage for Change and Justice

Barbara Butler

Part of my work in Christians Aware is organising conferences and there is one that will always remain in my memory. It was a shared conference with four other organisations and it was about pilgrimage in the Middle East. One of the speakers told the story of his journey to Gaza to meet and be with the people there at a troubled time. The story was a vivid account of a journey of struggle and sharing in the dire setting of people who faced trauma almost every day of their lives.

I remember the conference because some of the listeners were enraged that the speaker had told of a hard pilgrimage with people who were suffering but had made no mention of the holy places or of the refreshment of the pilgrims. The rest of my day was spent in preventing all-out warfare between the conference participants, and not really succeeding.

As I reflect on the conference and the nature of pilgrimage I can only hope and pray that all pilgrims may develop real awareness of the wider world and its people, many of whom struggle and suffer. Every true pilgrim surely begins the journey with love for the world and for the people he or she will focus on and also meet along the way. Sometimes the inspiration for the journey may become clearer as the way unfolds and the pilgrimage, as well as providing a catalyst for change amongst both pilgrims and the people they meet, may become lifelong.

The pilgrim who is open to people, places and events is moving in the finest tradition of pilgrimage, which is as old as people, an exciting challenge to people of every faith and inevitably involving worry and uncertainty as well as new life and hope. The pilgrim has always left the familiar, including family and friends, and moved into the unknown. The pilgrim has always been vulnerable and exposed rather than comfortable and secure. Meeting strangers is at the heart of pilgrimage and the people met on pilgrimage cannot be missed out or gone round. It is vital for the pilgrim to a new country, culture or faith to learn to trust others, to live with the people met in a new way, to experience their way of life, whether easy or hard, and to come to see the reality of the world afresh.

Anita Desai wrote a story about a man's search for an artist. When he found him he was old and ill and living in a pile of rags. But he was still the wonderful artist, and he could not be met and listened to, except through the pile of rags he inhabited.

The pilgrim is someone who makes connections between peoples, ways of life, and religions, between spiritual awareness and practical down to earth living and working, between the things of life and the things of death, between earth and heaven, God and humanity.

Through Christians Aware visits I have found many wonder-filled opportunities to go on pilgrimage, to make connections and to share challenges. I have enjoyed wonderful and surprising hospitality, including the special sweets given in a Calcutta slum and the wonderful spicy dishes shared in war-torn Sri Lanka. I have travelled to a Muslim community in Upper Egypt during the month of Ramadan and have found a warm welcome and good food, offered by people who were fasting. I have driven to a remote Maasai homestead in north western Kenya and been given hot rice and barbecued goat by people who seemed to have nothing to eat.

A special memory is of making a journey to a very remote part of Tanzania, where everything was covered in dust and the people were poor and ragged. We walked round the village and prayed in the small wooden church before being taken to a low building where wooden tables were laid out with tin plates and mugs. The meal was of delicious fish taken from the lake and chapattis which had been made that morning. I was taken back to the story of Jesus feeding the hungry people with the loaves and fishes given by the small boy.

Every year Christians Aware holds a sponsored pilgrimage to raise money for a boys' ashram in Kerala. The boys are orphans, those who have been abandoned by

their parents and those whose parents cannot look after them. The pilgrimage includes meditation and some news of the boys and the ashram. Sometimes photographs of the boys are brought along for pilgrims to look at. The person who organizes the walk had never visited the Kerala ashram until this year when she made an almost superhuman effort to travel to India, undertaking a very long eleven hour journey by road to the ashram to meet the boys. She was almost in tears as she entered the ashram to the sound of the boys singing their welcome songs, and they in turn were overjoyed to receive their visitors. The pilgrimage which began with a Derbyshire walk will hopefully go on for as long as children in Kerala need love and a home.

In the 'old days' of apartheid in South Africa we organised a Christians Aware pilgrimage which took British and South African people, Christians and Buddhists, from Henley-on-Thames to Trafalgar Square, stopping to sleep in church halls along the way and also giving talks and entering into discussion with members of the communities. There was an astounding moment at one of the meetings in a village hall. A video of life in South Africa under apartheid had been shown, followed by a short talk by a South African who had been in prison there for opposing apartheid. The moment came when an elderly woman stood up and gave a speech, the first in her life, during which she told everyone that she had always thought that apartheid was sensible and that her son and his family lived in South Africa. She continued, "I will write to them and tell them that apartheid is wrong and that they should come back to England." From that moment on the pilgrims, including those from South Africa who had suffered oppression and depression, were given new life and hope. The remaining journey was full of energy and even happiness, together with commitment for change and justice.

When the Maasai priest I know goes visiting he sets out to walk long distances in the scrubland of north western Kenya until he finds the people. When he finds them he lives with them and listens to them. He knows that though they are poor they are his trusted friends, those who will continue the journey with him, facing whatever the future may bring. Every pilgrim, walking with faith and trust in God and in people along the way may seek to change the world so that it is a fit place for God and for every person.

Barbara Butler is the Executive Secretary of Christians Aware, an educational and international charity working for development, justice and peace. Their website can be found at www.christiansaware.co.uk