



'...TO BE A PILGRIM...'
Cliff College, Derbyshire – 6-8 April 2018

REFLECTING BACK (by the Rev'd. Graham Sparkes)
'What was said and what we heard?'

Friday evening

The practice of pilgrimage is deeply rooted within the Christian traditions – and also in the traditions of other faiths. It has been a feature of our history. One of the most famous works of English literature from the late medieval period is Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales', that begins with the words:

'When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,

.....

Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.'

(translated by Nevill Coghill, Penguin Classics, 1951 p3)

The book goes on to recount the stories the pilgrims tell as they make their way to Canterbury.

The medieval world was very different from our own. People generally lived exclusive and monotonous lives; parishes had their clear boundaries and strangers were not generally welcome; conventions and expectations were clearly marked out; and you did not normally travel very far! For some to go on pilgrimage must have seemed like an opportunity to escape. But though that world was very different, the medieval pilgrim would also have recognised many of the pilgrim attitudes that we have been introduced to.

For them as for us, pilgrimage required the kind of **preparation** that involved

- letting go
- leaving things behind
- living lightly

One source of instruction said that pilgrims should be very careful how much they took with them, for if you died on the road with money in your pocket that meant you were not fit for the kingdom of God! Taking a hair-dryer with you would certainly not have been allowed!!

For us and for them, part of the meaning of pilgrimage requires not only letting go of material things, but also laying down hurts and burdens, either thrown at us or by us. Pilgrimage speaks into our need

for space and place to deal with the pain, the fear and the questions we carry. Large or small. Whether to do with ourselves, the church or the world.

Alan Jones writes:

‘From time to time I need to be made to feel the extent of my helplessness, so that I can say, with complete candor, “I can’t cope. This is really beyond me.” It is at that moment of admission that some new and good begins to happen in me. I begin to live from a center other than my self-protecting, manipulating ego. I begin to *move* in a new direction. My drifting is consecrated into pilgrimage.’

(Alan Jones – ‘Passion for Pilgrimage’, Harper Collins, 1995 p4)

Amongst us, at the start of our pilgrimage together, there have been moments that have hinted at the burdens some of us have carried and continue to carry. What can’t we cope with? What is too much to bear? How might our pilgrimage journey help us to grow into a new self-awareness and a new dependence on God, so to find a new way forward?

As we have begun to open up the theme of pilgrimage and explore its meaning for our lives, we have recognised that at its heart are important points of **tension**.

- On the one hand, pilgrimage has a focus on the destination.
On the other hand, pilgrimage asks us to focus on the next step.
- On the one hand, pilgrimage has a focus on the importance of place.
On the other hand, pilgrimage calls us to focus on the journey.

We need to hold these tensions together rather than try to decide between them! There are paradoxes here that lie at the heart of our faith. We will always want to remember that our home is not of this world and that we are travelling towards an eternal destination, but this must not prevent us from keeping our eyes on the path that lies immediately before us and that demands our commitment. A pilgrimage will give us a deep sense of place – of thin places where God’s presence is to be found – but it will always call us forwards and onwards, not allowing us to stay still.

Our pilgrimage is about holding these tensions, living with them, and allowing them to shape our journey.

Saturday morning

Our experiences of pilgrimage and our reflections on pilgrimage have offered us signals. We have been reminded of dangers we should seek to avoid, of aspects we need to watch out for and prepare for, and of dimensions we should gladly accept and embrace.

There is a **danger** that the idea of pilgrimage can be misused and abused. We must never forget that the Crusaders regarded themselves as pilgrims and used that fact to justify their murder of those who stood in their way. Pilgrimage brought with it an obsession with relics, aspects of which we would regard as little more than superstitious nonsense. There were those who saw their pilgrimage as a way of losing time in purgatory and gaining time in heaven, and others who saw pilgrimage as an act of penitence that did require unhealthy self-denial.

In short, there is a danger that a pilgrimage can become 'a work' rather than a journey of grace. We can surround it with requirements and expectations – and try to impose our own 'rules' on others. Not everyone can walk 100k! Not all will be able – or want – to carry everything on their back each day! Not all will keep up the pace, stay the course, and keep to the rules! And that is fine! We need a self-awareness that embraces the way of grace but allows others to find their own way.

The first famous pilgrim to Jerusalem was Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine. Evelyn Waugh wrote a novel about her pilgrimage. In that story Helena recalls the example of the wise men on their pilgrimage to see the Christ-child and she says this:

'Like me you were late in coming. The shepherds were here long before; even the cattle. They had joined the chorus of angels before you were on your way. For you the primordial discipline of the heavens was relaxed and a new defiant light blazed among the disconcerted stars.

'How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculations, where the shepherds had run barefoot! How odd you looked on the road, attended by what outlandish liveries, laden with such preposterous gifts!...

'Yet you came, and were not turned away. You too found room at the manger. Your gifts were not needed, but they were accepted and put carefully by, for they were brought with love. In that new order of charity that had just come to life there was room for you too. You were not lower in the eyes of the holy family than the ox or the ass.

'You are my especial patrons," said Helena, "and patrons of all late-comers, of all who have had a tedious journey to make to the truth, of all who are confused with knowledge and speculation...'

We must avoid the danger of rules! Even latecomers are welcome!

There are things to ***watch out for and prepare*** on pilgrimage. In particular, we must be ready for detours. There come to us moments of serendipity that we need to be open to and accept as special opportunities even if they take us off the path. We were reminded of this early on in the weekend when we reflected on Moses turning aside to see the burning bush.

It is worth saying that such detours must not distract us from being committed to the path we are called to travel. The plans we make are important and the discipline needed to fulfil them is necessary, but we must also be ready to lay them aside occasionally when opportunities open up to us. The great mystics of the church were people who rooted themselves in the disciplines of worship, prayer, reading scripture and living in community. This was the path that sustained them day by day. But as a result of such disciplines, they were open to those moments when God comes unexpectedly to open up a new horizon, and they responded.

We must beware of a busyness and an activism that doesn't allow for detours. Part of our journeying is to nurture within us, not only the disciplines that will sustain us, but also the openness to uncertainty, to amazement and wonder, to the imagination that will take us on unexpected detours.

There are those dimensions that we will want to gladly ***embrace*** on our pilgrim journeys. One of those we have identified is the therapeutic value of pilgrimage – its capacity to bring healing.

There have been many studies on the healing possibilities that pilgrimage offers. Here is an extract from just one, a pilgrimage for older people to Lourdes in France.

‘Prior to the pilgrimage, the pilgrims reported being depressed by losses they could not communicate... to their family, or to their church. During the pilgrimage, the pilgrims gained a narrative framework for coping with their past pain, and after the pilgrimage, reported that they experienced emotional healing regarding their previously silenced pain. Additionally, the pilgrimage provided a communal structure with similar individuals who moved through the rituals concurrently.’

(quoted in ‘The therapeutic value of pilgrimage: a grounded study theory’,
by Heather Warfield, Stanley Baker and Sejal Foxx, *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 2014)

Pilgrimage is a journey

- of body and soul,
- physical and also spiritual,
- outwards and inwards.

For some it will be a soul journey because the physical demands cannot be embraced – but it is just as much a pilgrimage. For many of us pilgrimage will have communal dimensions, as we join with others in search for justice and healing for our world, as well as personal quests for wholeness and healing. Social and personal holiness belong together! For all of us, pilgrimage offers a journey of mystery towards hope, where we face up to the reality of pain and loss and find the God who is wilder and more loving than we could ever imagine.

We need pilgrimage!

Saturday evening

Pilgrimage is so often a communal activity. It is done in community with all kinds of people, some known and others who become known. Just as Chaucer’s pilgrims told stories to one another, so we have told stories this evening about the journeys and experiences that have been part of the pilgrimage of individuals amongst us. If we choose to listen carefully, it is a rich experience of community. It is part of that deep sense of being part of a fellowship in heaven and on earth, of being in company with the saints who have gone before us, will come after us, and who are with us now.

There were two aspects of this sense of being a community of pilgrims that came through forcibly in our stories we heard.

The first is simple! When you are a community on the road, you depend on each other. There is a sense in which you are reduced to essentials, carrying what will get you through each day, and sometimes needing the help of companions. Pilgrimage communities develop a healthy dependence on one another that can be both practical and spiritual, and we heard a lot about how important simple companionship and friendship can be.

The second is powerful! A community of pilgrims is potentially subversive and dangerous! Though aspects of this are debated, pilgrimages of the past certainly offered the possibility of a deep togetherness developing across social rank and status. A pilgrimage could reduce everyone to the same

level! Whoever you were – a king or a peasant – the demands of the pilgrimage were the same, and so there was the potential for a radically inclusive community to develop on the road, that challenged the norms of society. The stories we heard echoed with that sense of how together, as Christians on the journey, we are able to – and need to – challenge the norms and expectations of our society. It might be writing letters supporting those seeking asylum, or standing together against racism, or showing a simple sign of friendship and welcome. Whatever it is, pilgrimage can bring us together, such that we find our common humanity in God and become agents of subversion in an alien culture.

BUT: though pilgrimage has these **community** dimensions, it is also a journey that needs to be taken **alone**.

During the afternoon some of us walked, and in our walking we were encouraged to find a rhythm. Sometimes that rhythm brought us alongside others in conversation. Sometimes it left us walking on our own or in silence. The rhythm meant different things at different times.

The interior journey that is an important part of pilgrimage does require space, silence and aloneness. Our exploring needs the gift of stillness to know the place from which we came and are possibly returning – perhaps, indeed, to know it for the first time. Mystery and wonder do not reveal themselves amidst constant noise and distraction, but rather require us to find silence.

Brother John from Taizé says this:

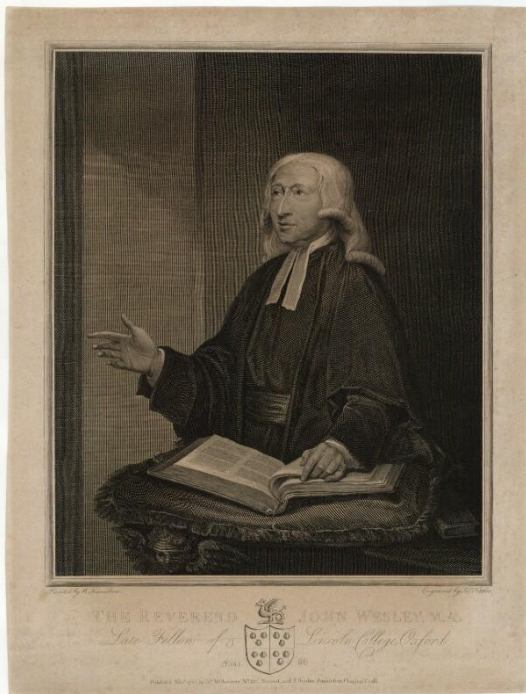
‘The crowds of young people who have been coming for years to the hill of Taizé are very diverse. Nevertheless, they are, for the most part, characterized by two main features: the search for the meaning of their life, in silence and contemplation; and the concern to share their spiritual and material goods, especially with the most deprived. *Prayer and sharing*: these two main axes of faith are precisely the values which the pilgrimage strongly emphasizes.’

(quoted in Robinson (ed), ‘Sacred Places, Pilgrim Paths’ p71)

Share in community and silence in prayer are both vital aspects of pilgrimage if we are to know who we are and where we are going.

Sunday morning

There are three images for us to help us draw some threads together from our journeying together in pilgrimage over two days.



a) **James Fittler – 'John Wesley' (line engraving, published November 1788)**

This image of John Wesley is in the National Portrait Gallery, and you may be able to see that at the bottom is a coat of arms for Wesley (one of several he used!) and it contains scallop shells in each quadrant. Shells that continue to be the symbol for pilgrimage.

So it is important to recall that these idea of pilgrimage is deeply rooted in the Methodist tradition and in the Christian traditions more widely. It is a rich theme with rich possibilities, woven into the ongoing stories of our faith, encompassing so many dimensions, bringing them into a whole, and offering healing possibilities where there has been a fracturing and a tearing apart. We have been reminded at different points on our journey about the way in which pilgrimage brings into unity:

- Body and spirit
- Inner and outer
- Movement and destination
- Community and solitude
- Personal and social

We need to capture and recapture this sense of being pilgrims and all that it involves. It is there at the heart of our faith and of our own particular Christian tradition.



b) **Georgia O'Keeffe – 'Winter Road I' (1963)**

At the beginning of our weekend we were reminded that 'the road goes ever on and on'. We are already (mostly) packed for the next stage of the journey, and we have been challenged to consider where God is leading us next. Soon there will be 'goodbyes' and on to another time and place.

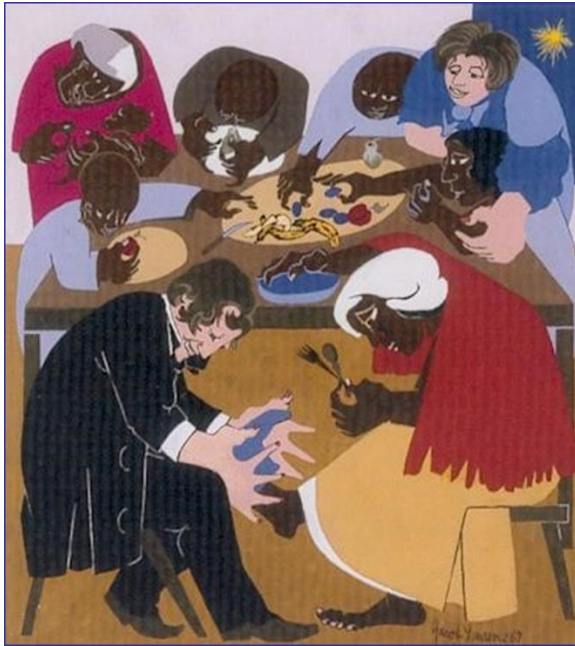
But we have been challenged to pay attention on the road. To:

- Look and see
- Listen and hear
- Stop and reflect

Georgia O'Keeffe is an artist who pays attention. She looks carefully and notices deeply what is around her and what she

sees. Known for her close-up paintings of flowers – things that most people pass by without noticing – she also looks carefully at the landscape around her and finds

unique beauty. Moments of grace are all around us, often through the people we meet, sometimes in creation, and always as we gather to pay attention to God. Even if the road appears empty there is grace to be found. As we continue our pilgrimage we go with the particular call to exercise the effort of attention.



c) **Jacob Lawrence – ‘Harriet and the Promised Land 13’ (1967)**

We have helpfully sketched out understandings of pilgrimage. We have recognised that it involves an interior journey and often a physical journey. We have also recognised that it is about a search for justice – both personal and social. Lines do not have to be drawn, nor choices made, for these aspects belong together.

This picture adds to the stories of justice making that we shared last night and again this morning in one of the workshops. It comes from an African-American, Jacob Lawrence. He told the stories of his people, including their experience of slavery, and this comes from a series that recounts the particular story of Harriet Tubman. She was a woman who escaped from slavery in the southern states of the USA and headed north. But, crucially, she

didn't stay there. Her pilgrimage journey led her back in secret, returning to rescue others from slavery, using what was known as the Underground Railroad – a series of secret safe houses – to guide the fugitives to safety in Canada.

This picture portrays a group of escaped slaves stopping off at one of those safe houses, where they are given food, hospitality and care for weary feet. The links with the communion meal and with the story of Jesus' washing the disciples' feet are clear, and it reminds us that the Eucharist is a place where injustice is challenged. Here, as we gather to be renewed at the table before continuing our journey, we are challenged to make our pilgrimage one that speaks justice to a broken world. It is food for our journey – food for all those who make a pilgrimage in search of freedom.

*Graham Sparkes
April 2018*

The Rev'd Graham Sparkes is a Baptist minister who after serving in two pastorates in Bristol and Kings Langley, went on to lead the work of the Faith and Unity Department at Baptist House, included ecumenical engagement and work on justice issues. In 2011 he became President of Luther King House in Manchester, an ecumenical partnership for theological education, where he teaches Christian Spirituality as well as offering leadership to the partnership. Graham has developed a particular interest in the relationship between art and faith, and has co-authored 'God and the Art of Seeing: visual resources for a journey of faith'. He is one of the Patrons of the Retreat Association.