



Archbishop Stephen gave a talk at Carlisle Cathedral this evening entitled: Things that I learned on a very long walk – Pilgrimage unpacked. His talk follows in full...

In 1986 just over 1,800 people walked the Camino – it means ‘the way’ - the ancient, 1000-year-old pilgrimage route to Santiago. We know this, because when you complete the journey, you get what’s called a Compostela from the Pilgrims’ Bureau. They check the stamps on your ‘pilgrim passport,’ verifying that you have walked at least 100km.

In 2016 – just thirty years later – 300,000 people walked it. Again, we know the figure from the compostelas issued. That year, I was one of them.

Enjoying the sabbatical leave that stipendiary clergy get every ten years or so, I said Mass in my chapel at Bishops court, outside Chelmsford where I was living at the time. I walked to Ingatestone station. I got the train to Plymouth, the overnight ferry to Santander, and then walked a large part of the Camino del Norte, the less travelled northern route from Irun to Santiago. I walked about 700km, roughly 400 miles. It took a month.

So let me start with the obvious: pilgrimage has become hugely popular in recent years. It’s big business. It’s on TV. It’s getting hard to find a Christian who hasn’t walked to Santiago! And it’s not just Christian people. Pilgrimage has always been a hugely significant part of Muslim and Jewish faith and, indeed, most other faith traditions. And many of the people who walk to Santiago each year, and across all the other pilgrimage routes that are being rediscovered or newly opened across the world, do not call themselves religious – though they may well be spiritual - and walk for all sorts of other reasons, for health, wholeness, mindfulness, and to reconnect with and visibly live lightly on the earth.

So, it seems to me to be important that we reflect on what’s going on here, and what it might mean for discipleship and mission.

Let’s start with the obvious. A pilgrimage must be a journey before it is a destination.

The little book of poems and stories I wrote a few years ago reflecting on my own Camino, begins with these words –

“We must be the first generation of Christians who think pilgrimage is about arriving rather than travelling.” [1](#)

Moreover, the prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, where we are told that to “pass the long journey (the pilgrims) told each other stories”, concludes:

“I wouldn’t like you to think that I was looking forward more to the stories than to visiting the shrine of holy St Thomas but there is more to be said for pilgrimages than just seeing a holy place. You often meet such extraordinary people on the way.”

Pilgrimage, then, is not simply a walk (however long or short); it is about following a route that many others have walked before, where they have

encountered the Holy on route to a holy place. And often in the people they meet.

If you've seen it, think about the encounters Martin Sheen's character has in the 2010 film which itself did much to re-invigorate the Camino to Santiago, *The Way*. It is hearing the stories of others, worshipping with them, eating, and praying together, having life stripped back to its essentials, and sharing the load, which bring meaning to the journey. And in our individualistic, materialist, frantic, and over pressured culture, it shouldn't be surprising that pilgrimage is attractive to all sorts of people, as a way of inhabiting life and of learning how to travel through life differently.

People make these journeys because they're looking for something. It may not be God, but it is a way of knowing themselves and their place in the earth. And it may also be a way of deliberately getting away from the pressures, demands and unrelenting busyness of so-called normal life.

I remember walking to Canterbury over 30 years ago with a group of young people from the parish where I was then serving. It was a glorious week. Several of the young people came to faith on that journey. One of them is now ordained and traces his vocation back to that pilgrimage. When I was back in the parish the following week, I bumped into one of the stalwarts of the church who greeted me warmly and said it must be nice to be back in the real world. Inside I wanted to scream. Because what I discovered on the road with those young people was more real and more beautiful than so much that passed for normality and had become my unquestioned reality.

The very word 'pilgrim' has its origins in the Latin word *peregrinus* which means a foreigner, a stranger, someone on a journey, or a temporary resident. In the Old Testament, we often encounter the word sojourner (*gur* in Hebrew), which captures the temporary nature of our existence on earth, as we pass through this world into the next (heaven). Therefore, to go on pilgrimage is to be powerfully reminded that the whole of life is a journey; that this world as it is, is not our true home.

These motifs and images of journey, of exile and exodus, of pilgrimage, shape our scriptures from Moses leading the people through the desert to the promised land to Jesus joining Cleopas on the road to Emmaus.

In the 1960s, the Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, wrote a book, *Three Mile an Hour God* (SCM Press). Observing that human beings walk at about three miles per hour, he noted that Jesus, who is God, must have walked at the same pace, and that, therefore, love has a speed. And says Koyama, and that speed is slow. That speed is gentle. That speed is tender.

Rebecca Solnit, a more secular pilgrim, makes a similar observation in her fabulous book *Wunderlust* –

"I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought..."

And it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who said –

“I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs.”

Pilgrimage – or any walking journey for that matter - requires us to slow down to God’s pace.

And when we slow down things happen.

First of all, we learn what the very first Christians learned, that we are called to follow Christ and to walk in his way. Thus, it was that the first Christians were called ‘followers of the way.’

Eamon Duffy tells us that the “journey itself is part of the point,” as was the danger and discomfort” that mediaeval pilgrims would have certainly experienced but also the vulnerability and uncertainty and challenge that contemporary pilgrims face. He goes on –

“So, people go on pilgrimage.... to sort their heads out. Walking or travelling can be a way of separating yourself from the world in which you are usually enmeshed, enabling you to see life with a new kind of radical simplicity, experiencing danger and discomfort.”2

When I walked to Santiago 6 years ago, this is what I learned about being a disciple of Jesus and following in the way.

I learned first that someone had been this way before me. Across the whole of northern Spain there are yellow arrows pointing you to Santiago.

It is very difficult to get lost. Although on the occasion when I disregarded the arrows and just followed the person 100 yards ahead of me who had a rucksack on his back and whom I assumed to be a pilgrim, I was somewhat disconcerted when he turned into his house in the small village we had just entered. I was lost and a mile or so off the route.

I learned that you cannot choose your fellow travellers or your companions on the road. If you are walking in the mountains in northern Spain and someone is alongside you, then unless you choose to stop or run ahead then they are your companion for the day. And when you find a bed for the night in one of the little pilgrim hostels that are in virtually every town and village across northern Spain, then the person on the bunkbed below or above you and all those round about you are your neighbours, whether you like it or not. And you must decide whether the cacophony of snoring that strikes up every night and to which you no doubt contribute when you fall asleep yourself is going to drive you mad or bolster up your prayer.

Is there anything more important the Church needs to learn at the moment? That we are sisters and brothers and fellow companions, and we cannot choose who is in and who is out.

And I learned that there is a big and beautiful space between A and B, and that while in the rest of life I usually try to get between A and B in the

quickest possible time by the shortest possible route, there is a spacious depth of loveliness in every moment and every footstep if you just find yourself forced to look, indeed to slow down to God's pace.

And I learned what enough looks like.

The guidebooks told me that if it were possible, I should try to ensure my rucksack weighed no more than 9kg. Though they seemed to imply this would be difficult to do. I weighed mine the day before I set off and it came in at just over nine. I was pleased with myself I was travelling light. And let me tell you that 9kg is pretty heavy when you are on your own walking uphill in the heat of a hot Spanish afternoon.

But let me also tell you that one of the most sobering things I learned was that I still had too much. I, for instance, took three pairs of socks and three pairs of knickers and three shirts, and I discovered I only needed two. Wash one, wear one. Wash one, wear one. That was the simplicity I discovered.

And I learned what that line in the Lord's prayer - give us today our daily bread - that I've said so many times and never really understood, actually meant, 'Please give me, Lord, enough for today; and save me, spare me, stop me, from wanting more than my share.'

Is there anything more important the world needs to learn?

And I learned how to receive the hospitality of strangers: so many acts of kindness that helped me on the way.

And I learned a vulnerability that, if I'm honest, I have never really experienced before in my life, for I am someone who has always known where the next meal is coming from and where I will sleep at night. With this taken away, not only was I dependent upon the hospitality of others, but I was also more open to them and, I suppose to God, that I'd ever been before.

And I learned a tremendous joy. I hope I hadn't been a miserable git before I set off, but the sum total of all my walking and all my learning was joy. And this was born out of the refining and stripping away of my life and my faith to the simple repetition of my footsteps and the rhythm of my beating heart, although it was enormously hard at times, and there were days when I wondered whether I would be able to make it.

And I learned again that I am one of those people who needs to move in order to be still. Rousseau said he could only think with his legs. I have found I can't really pray without mine. So, when I got to Santiago, my overwhelming desire was to just keep walking.

All of this is hugely important for discipleship and evangelism today –

- knowing that someone has gone this way before you.
- that you cannot choose your fellow travellers.

- that we are sisters and brothers one to another, one humanity inhabiting one world.
- appreciating each moment, each step, each heartbeat.
- learning what enough looks like.
- travelling light.
- receiving the hospitality of strangers.
- finding joy in vulnerability.
- finding out how to pray.

And to actually go on pilgrimage makes this very real.

It is therefore good for our discipleship and for the ways we share the gospel to rediscover our Christian identity as those who follow – and therefore walk – in the way. Going on pilgrimage and discovering the stripped back basic necessities and vulnerabilities of travelling will help us reorder our lives and reset our compass.

Of course, not everyone is able to walk. Very recently, Stephen Need, one time Dean of St George's College, Jerusalem, brought out a pilgrimage prayer book where you could visit Jerusalem from your armchair at home.^{[3](#)} I recommend it.

Moreover, the reason St Francis of Assisi introduced cribs and stations of the cross into our church buildings was because not everyone can get to Bethlehem or Jerusalem.

Or think about the encouragement of our interior life through the motif of pilgrimage in a Christian classic such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

But when you set out on pilgrimage – be it actually or virtually - you see things differently. You experience life differently. Conversations are richer and deeper. And slower. You seem to have more time.

And in a side-by-side 'walking along together conversation' silence isn't a problem. In fact, it is a blessed gift, from which deeper questions and observations emerge. Like with Jesus on the Emmaus Road.

Inviting people to go on pilgrimage therefore is also evangelism. And since secular pilgrims seeking mindfulness and closer proximity to the earth may well outnumber so called religious pilgrims at the moment, this is surely an area where we should be putting some effort.

Actually, this is happening.

As well as places in the UK such as Iona and Lindisfarne receiving over 150,000 visitors a year, and Walsingham around 250,000 pilgrims, and

with pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela numbering in their millions, even if nowadays most of them arrive by bus, plane, or cruise liner, other sites within the UK are developing opportunities for pilgrimage. Most cathedrals – including this one - are exploring ways of meeting the challenge of turning tourists interested in the historical facts and architectural triumphs of their buildings to pilgrims who can be open to the peace and beauty of the cathedral which offers an opportunity to reflect and pray. Or the beautiful schools' labyrinth you have here.

New networks of pilgrim paths are also being developed, such as St Cuthbert's way from Melrose to Holy Island which I walked last year. Or St Ninian's way, starting here in Carlisle, which I haven't yet walked. Or the three-day, 25-mile, Cumbrian Cistercian Way from Piel Castle to Cartmel Priory.

Last year, young people who travelled to Glasgow for COP 26 called it 'a pilgrimage'. They walked on the earth and in solidarity with the earth. This pilgrimage called attention to the injustices and challenge of our climate crisis, making pilgrimage itself a form of prophetic witness, and a sign of God's call to do justice and to love mercy.

I find all this hugely inspiring and I think it offers us huge opportunities for developing discipleship and furthering our mission. I hope that in the coming years under the banner of Faith in the North, and working with others in all our dioceses including this one, we can see how these things can not only shape our own discipleship but enable us to find ways of reaching out to others, especially the young. Watch this space for more information about how you can access resources and inspiration on these themes.

And although they're not pilgrimages, we also read in scripture about Paul's missionary journeys. I think we might find that getting out on foot and walking the streets of our communities, might, as it did for Paul, open doors of opportunity to share the Christian faith. Many of the great missionary bishops of the past also evangelised this way. I've already done it once or twice here in Cumbria with Bishop James and I look forward to a day of missionary endeavours with Bishop Rob tomorrow.

As we think about the whole of life as a journey home to God, and of pilgrimage as a specific way of setting aside a period of time to experience journeying and as a way of stripping back life and connecting with what is essential, then I hope we may become a pilgrim Church – a church on the move, a church inviting others to share the journey, a church with its sights set on God and on God's kingdom.

Finally, when I did walk the Camino to Santiago six years ago, I set myself the happy task of writing a sonnet each day.

I like writing, but as I was on my own - and didn't have much else to do as I was walking - I thought the simplicity and brevity of the sonnet form would be something I could perhaps compose in my head as I walked along, and then write down in the evenings at the hostels where I stayed.

These poems, and some stories to accompany them, have been published in the book [Striking Out](#), and I would like to finish with one of them:

I leapt! I leapt!

I put down the bird that was in my hand
and found a flock of swallows in the bush.

I purchased a pig from a man with a poke,
and fashioned two silk purses from her ears.

I held an acorn tightly, and felt the oak.
It set my faint heart beating once again.

Two plus two plus two doesn't equal six.
Madrid is not the capital of Spain,

Neither Santiago nor Seville.
It set my faint heart breaking once again.

The broth was delicious, even though I
asked some other cooks to help with the cooking.

The rain in Spain falls mainly on the hills.
I leapt. I leapt. For once, I wasn't looking.

- 1Striking Out, Pg xiii
- 2'Living with the Gods', BBC, 10 October 2017 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2017/living-with-the-gods-october>)
- 3Following Jesus in the Holy Land, Pathways of Discipleship through Advent and Lent - an armchair pilgrimage.

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