

LENT PILGRIMAGE

SPRINGTIME OF FAITH

A few weeks ago I mentioned that Lent was nearly upon us and someone in the congregation let forth an audible groan – ‘O God!’ Whoever that was – I sympathise with you! We’ve had more than enough of privation – most of the things we love doing in fact - and so a traditional understanding of Lent as a time of austerity has much less to commend it this year. But perhaps that’s just as well, so that we focus on other aspects of Lent. I’ve said before my favourite description of Lent is the ‘springtime of our faith’, a time of growth and renewal and hope.

LOOKING FORWARD WITH HOPE

This idea of hope lies behind this year’s Lent theme of **pilgrimage** here at St Michael’s. At a time when we can’t travel, it might seem a strange choice – but that’s precisely the point!

We are looking forward with hope to a time when we will be able to travel again, but in the meantime we can travel to far off places in our imagination and our hearts. We begin from a place of outward limitation, but there’s no limit on the inward and virtual pilgrim.

So this year our Sunday morning sermon series explores a different place of pilgrimage each week: Canterbury, Rome, Jerusalem, Walsingham and Compostela – asking the question: ‘What makes this place special? And the sermon is followed by online coffee with someone who has a particular connection with that place.

CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimage has almost always been important to the Christian faith.

From the disciples whom met the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus, to the early Christians who were simply called followers of ‘The Way’ – God is often encountered on a journey.

We might say that the Wise Men were the first Christian pilgrims - in the sense that Christ was the object of their seeking. Matthew’s enigmatic phrase that ‘they departed by another road’ suggests that they were changed by their encounter with the Lord - which is the aim of all pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage reached its height in the middle ages with the great shrines of Europe. Many of us will have toiled through the *Prologue* of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* at school, and seen the mixed bag of people travelling together towards Saint Thomas Becket’s Shrine. What better metaphor could there be for the Church? People with different motives and expectations, desires, dreams and backgrounds, all of them drawn by some sense of the holy, some need to find God not only in a place but also on the road. A pilgrim people always on the move, seeking God together.

Today, pilgrimage is more popular than ever, although today’s pilgrims are more likely to be agnostic or even atheist, yet a restless impulse for the sacred still grips the imagination and God’s grace has entered the heart of many an uncertain and even unwilling pilgrim on the road as it did St Paul on the road to Damascus.

VIRTUAL PILGRIMAGES

Of course, inward or virtual pilgrimages aren't a new idea. The nativity scenes in churches at Christmas help us travel 'even in mind and heart unto Bethlehem' as the Bidding Prayer to the service of Lessons and Carols puts it. A pilgrimage site such as Walsingham, known as 'England's Nazareth', came into being as a way of experiencing the domestic life of Christ nearer to our own home.

Likewise the Stations of the Cross developed as a substitute for pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Christians who were unable to go there could still walk the Way of the Cross, and see and hear what it was like to travel in the footsteps of Jesus – in this way, everyone could receive at least some of the benefits of pilgrimage.

Many spiritual writers have reflected on the inward pilgrimage as a metaphor for the journey of faith that last a lifetime.

Thomas a Kempis in the 'Imitation of Christ' paraphrases Saint Paul when he reminds us that *'here we have no lasting city, wherever you may be you are a stranger and a pilgrim'*.

As **James Harpur**, the author of our Lent book reminds us, the word pilgrim literally means *'one who walks through the land'* – but that may be the landscape of our soul and the pathway of the spirit as much as the woods and fields around us.

What always amazes me is how every person's journey is unique, and so each Sunday at Evensong we will hear from members of this congregation about their own pilgrimage of faith ... so far.

TRANSFIGURATION

In today's Gospel, the disciples Christ leads three of his disciples on a journey – a kind of pilgrimage - up a mountain. It didn't just happen anywhere and this fact is important -

In Exodus, Moses entered into the cloud of God's presence of Mt Sinai and received there the Commandments of God.

In the First Book of Kings, Elijah proved the supremacy of Israel's God over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

So it is no surprise that Christ does the same, and both Elijah and Moses appear beside him.

Mountains are places of holy encounter and in such a place the disciples see something of who Jesus really is as they glimpse Christ's glory and divinity.

We still speak of 'mountaintop experiences', those moments in life when we seem to see a bigger picture, and life is transfigured in the light of eternity.

Our challenge is the same as that of the disciples – to then take that experience back down the mountain and somehow integrate it into our lives.

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

In a few days time we will hear the familiar call of Christ to *'take up your Cross and follow me'*. The pilgrim always walks with baggage, and it is a long road and a difficult journey, but we also know that there is no better path for us to follow – for the pilgrim knows that the way of Christ is none other than the way of truth and the way of life eternal.