PILGRIMAGE – AN OLD IDEA FINDING A NEW MEANING

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'Afoot and light hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel he open road'.
Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman cherished the open road and the place where he could go deep and learn more about himself and his place in the Universe. He was one, like the pilgrim, who embraced the journey and the ancient notion of *Solvitur Ambulando* – It is solved by walking!

This phrase, attributed to a range of sources from Diogenes the Cynic to St Augustine, suggests the formative, healing and resolving power of pilgrimage. The journey or pilgrimage is a key motif of human growth. Life is a wonder journey of discovery and exploration. On first hearing the phrase, *Solvitur Ambulando,* from the lips of the intrepid travel writer Patrick Leigh-Fermor, the equally restless and itinerant writer and traveller, Bruce Chatwin was captivated. He knew, as thousands of others have known, that his brain only began to work fruitfully when he engaged his feet.

The human family is, of course, permanently restless and on the move. In a matter of a few thousand years, Homo Sapiens emerged out of Africa and peopled the world at an average pace of three miles an hour. We have been journeying with our tents for more of human history than the relatively short period during which cities and villages have been our home. We are nomadic people.

The early Christians were the 'People of the Way', on a journey following Jesus into the heart of the Divine. The practice of pilgrimage is common to many spiritual traditions, not just Christianity, because the impetus to journey, explore, search and discover; deepening our grasp on reality is a fundamental human trait. As John Muir, the great wilderness traveller once wrote, 'The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest of wilderness….. And into the forest I go to lose my mind and find my soul'.

The Biblical narrative is full of stories in which the remote, wild places, the mountains and the time apart from the madding crowd acts as the proving ground of great spiritual awakening, transformation and action. Think of Moses leading the Hebrew people through the wilderness towards a promised land, all the while forming them, shaping them as a nation and teaching them the Law. Think of Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok River as the prelude to his return and spiritual transformation. Elijah in the wilderness meeting God as he passes by strengthening his prophetic witness to his people. John the Baptist, emerging out of the desert filled with the Spirit and preaching the baptism of repentance. Jesus finding time apart to pray, to prepare and to find the strength to face up to all he had to accomplish. All these are wonder pilgrimages into the new, into transformation and deeper communion with the heart of God.

Walking is our natural human state, and, when the path is broad enough and two people can walk side-by-side and communicate easily, so much can be resolved as the landscape discloses its stories and nature reveals her mysterious power to captivate and heal. For nature too has a healing power and in recent years a medical condition coined as '*Nature Deficit Disorder'* describes those who suffer from not having the chance to spend time in the wild outdoors. What most pilgrims come to know is that we may set out to 'do' a pilgrimage, but the pilgrimage 'does' us, testing us, awakening us, healing us and shaping us. It might be the natural environment that has a part to play in this, but it is also the wild, free Spirit, that 'blows where it wills' and gets into the soul of the pilgrim.

The desire to pay homage at a holy well, to visit a cathedral where holy relics are resting may prompt the journey in the first place, but the destination seems to matter less than the journey itself. What happens along the way is where the adventure happens. As many pilgrims avow, 'home is the journey'. In

medieval times, pilgrimage as a penitential journey was one way of earning heavenly 'credit', and if you were rich enough you could send a 'Palmer' to undertake the journey on your behalf. There is, however, a world of difference between pilgrimage as a transactional enterprise and the idea of pilgrimage as a transformative journey.

For others, even up to the present day, a visit to the holy sites in Jerusalem associated with Jesus could be a life-long ambition. There may be numerous reasons why people set off, but the wonder voyage of the pilgrimage has a way of overmastering our expectations. There are echoes of this idea in Jesus's encounter with the Pharisee Nicodemus (John 3). Jesus's encouragement to Nicodemus to lift his head from his books and his settled perspectives and listen to the wind indicates that there is always more to discover. The Spirt blows where she wills, 'and you do not know where it comes from or where it is going'. This is the key gift to the pilgrim, the surprise of new insight, fresh perspectives and spiritual growth.

So, what is going on when we embark on a pilgrimage?

Entering the Narrative.

The first thing is that we begin to inhabit a narrative. As we step out from our starting place, which is our own front door, the chances are that we soon find ourselves following a well-trodden route. Others have passed this way before us. We become participants in an unfolding drama. If we are following a pilgrim route to a place like Santiago de Compostela or Rome, Canterbury or Whithorn, we are sharing in a journey with others.

Robert the Bruce is supposed to have suffered from Leprosy. He travelled more than once in his life to the shrine of St Ninian at Whithorn seeking healing. Countless pilgrims flocked to St Andrews in Fife to pay homage to the relics of Scotland's patron saint until interest in that waned and was put paid to by the Reformation. It had been a rich cultural and spiritual tradition that drew pilgrims from across Europe.

The narrative of faith is a mixture of belief, history and legend. It is also an opportunity to celebrate the local. There are countless places throughout the

Christian world associated with a particular person. That local saint might be revered in one place, but all but unknown elsewhere.

In my first parish at Collace in Perthshire, we discovered a reference to a local saint, Uchan, who was possibly the saint associated with the foundation of Collace Church in the pre-Norman times. No-one I spoke to remembered the name until my brother-in-law, Jamie, who farms in the area, showed me an ancient map he has which showed St Uchan's Well, not far from the church. The community had completely forgotten this link to the ancient past. The well had been dammed to provide a water supply many years ago so that this part of the parish no longer carried the name of the saint but is known by the rather uninspiring name of Damside.

In pre-Reformation times, such local saints provided a focus for celebrating faith and community identity. Whilst the famous destinations of pilgrimage remain well known even today, small communities like Collace and countless others would be places of pilgrimage too, as people remembered the pioneering work undertaken by figures like Uchan who brought to good news of the Gospel to a particular locality. G.K. Chesterton once wrote that, 'nothing is real unless it is local' and we are discovering in all sorts of spheres of life, not least in the life of the church, that grassroots, local approaches are more likely to engage people's hearts and minds than something perceived as being 'top-down', handed on from remote figures of authority.

On the 4th of June 1242, David de Bernham, Bishop of St Andrews came to St Uchan's Church at Collace and rededicated a church that had already been in existence for several centuries. This 'Norman' bishop, thoroughly connected to the increasingly centralised Roman church was possibly of the view that these 'Celtic' foundations, often established on previously sacred Druidic sites, were not properly 'Christian'. He rededicated them in an elaborate ceremony described, apparently in some detail, in the original service book that de Bernham carried, now held in a Paris Library.

The overarching narrative of the pilgrim journey is, however, the story of the primitive church, 'The people of the Way'. The pilgrim is on a journey into discipleship, seeking to follow in the Way. For many pilgrims today, it may be that people set out with no particular faith connection. The contemporary

pilgrimage may not be the penitential journeys they once were. However, the act of taking the first steps places people in a situation in which the wild wind of the Spirit might blow through them and many are caught up in that wider narrative of faith. As they hear stories of places and localities and participate in acts of worship, meditation and reflection that is not their normal habit, it can take them by surprise and nourishes the spark of faith.

'**The eternal seeping through the physical**'.
One aspect of contemporary Christianity in the west is how cerebral it is. In so many respects, it is a religion of beliefs, propositions and ideas. It is ironic that a faith system so rooted in incarnational theology appears to pay so little attention to the body. Indeed, it has sometimes felt that the flesh is seen as prone to sin and evil and is best constrained, if not shed all together. This always seems to be poor theology, when we speak of Christ born to an earthly mother and of his resurrection as a physical reality. The Orthodox poet and theologian, Philip Sherrard has written that the creation is, 'the manifestation of God's holy hidden being'. The body deserves our attention, the natural world our reverence and careful tending.

On a pilgrim journey on foot, there is always the chance to rejoice in our physicality, and if we are well, to witness the capacity of bodies to cope with exertion and to gain fitness. We run the risk of injury too. In the event of a setback, however, we invariably meet others who will offer us kindness and help, strangers tending to our needs.

We often see ourselves as observers of nature, naming trees, plants and birds, and falling into the trap of thinking of ourselves as removed from nature. In reality, we are subjects within nature and to remember that is an important lesson. Dominion over the natural world has at times characterised our Christian tradition, the world seen as a quarry at our disposal.

Dominion can lead to disdain for the physical and has contributed to the plundering and devastation of so much of the natural world, with loss of habitat and species mounting by the day.

The discipline of pilgrimage brings our bodies back into focus, reminding us that the journey of faith is not a purely mental exercise. It is deeply rooted in

our physicality as Jesus clearly demonstrated in his incarnation, life, death and resurrection. The Genesis narrative speaks of humanity's dominion over the earth, but it also speaks of our role a people set in the garden to 'tend and serve'. Perhaps the time is right to emphasise the latter rather than indulge in the former.

The Landscape Reading us

There is another opportunity for the walker too, a conversation with the landscape. John Muir, that son of Dunbar who, with his family, moved to the United States as a young boy and became one of the founders of the conservation movement, has much to teach us. For Muir, though brought up in a devoutly Presbyterian atmosphere, the natural world became his Bible. "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe", he once wrote. His relationship to the Divine deepened as he saw the natural world as evidence of the creative hand behind the Universe. That sense of reverence and awe led Muir to hate the notion of hiking, instead he would head off on epic pilgrimages through the vast landscapes of the western United States and would 'saunter'. Hiking felt to him too aggressive a word. It has the quality of overmastering about it. Instead, he preferred that people should "saunter" in wild places, for all ground is holy ground.

That holy ground can read us and tell us its own stories if only we listen and become one with it, rather than seeking always to objectify it or dominate it. Muir thought that the word saunter derived from pilgrims on their way through France to "Sancte Terre", the "Holy Land". "Where are you heading", someone might ask a passing wayfarer. "A la Sancte Terre", they would reply, "to the Holy Land".

A Scottish friend who has lived in France for more than 30 years objects to this definition and suggests those who sauntered in France were landless peasants, displaced from their farms by rapacious landlords. They were "Sans Terre". I like that juxtaposition and either definition will do.

The immersion in landscape that so shaped Muir is something that is open to every pilgrim. Rather than being a remote observer, after days of journeying, plodding along in the meditative state that walking can bring about, pilgrims can become one with the landscape and the landscape might begin to read us,

interrogate us and change the grain of our thinking. Even those without any faith background can feel their perspective altered by the experience of oneness with the landscape and the Universe through which we journey.

Welcoming the Stranger and the Different

Whilst we journey, we meet people with different beliefs, perspectives and experiences. Here we encounter a remarkable irony. The 'People of the Way' were on a journey into the new, a resurrection community. So, why did our Christian ancestors soon begin to build huge edifices, such as the great cathedrals of Europe that exude an aura of fixity and permanence? Why, too, did the church at its various councils settle on an immovable set of doctrines and practices, when surely, journeying people knew in their hearts that being on the move deepened faith and understanding through the surprise of encountering the new, the different and the challenging? Some say it was because the early church, with the acceptance of Christianity by Constantine the Great, adopted the clothes of Empire, established its citadels of power and abandoned its travelling ways, and, some might say, its progressive journey towards newness and fresh understanding.

Of course, there is always the risk that our settled thinking might be challenged by the differing perspectives we encounter. Indeed, the beleaguered and battered story of our faith through the centuries is probably the result of people building citadels of 'true' faith and becoming intolerant of, if not aggressive towards alternatives.

As you read the story of the unfolding Christian narrative in Scotland, stretching back as it does to the time of Ninian and Columba, you bear witness to a story that goes through numerous changes and plot shifts. From the Celtic origins of the church on the fringe of empires both Roman and Christian, to the period of Christendom that persisted until the tumult of the Reformation in the 16th century that split Europe in two. Four and a half centuries of Protestantism followed, in which, for many of those years, the Church dominated and alternative voices, including other branches of the church, were supressed. The pilgrim, walking through the Scottish landscape, opens herself to the full scope of the Christina narrative of our story.

Today, our ground is parched and many people will go off on pilgrimages not because they have lost faith in the mystery of the Divine, but because they have lost faith in the institutions of religion. People thirst for spiritual refreshment, for streams of living water, but the institutional church often struggles to offer to people what they are looking for. The liberating message of Jesus remains the same, but the language and manner of how that message comes to us can be broadened by the rediscovery and rehabilitation of pilgrimage as a means to encounter the Divine nature. Is it the case that many springs of potential refreshment have been blocked up over the years?

All of this has come about not so much out of malice, but rather a narrow religious outlook that has chosen to denounce and dismantle much of what has gone before on ideological or political grounds. As the great Franciscan and Mystic Richard Rohr has written:

> *Most of history has been content with cultural truth, denominational truth, national truth, scientific truth, rational truth, factual truth, personal truth, etc. These are all needed and helpful, but true religion affirms the Big Truth beyond any of these limited truths. This is what makes authentic religion inherently subversive and threatening to all systems of power and control. It always says, "Yes, and!" (Richard Rohr Daily Meditation 12/10/22)*

So many of those who struggle with institutional religion today do so because of the legacy of power and control that the church has exercised over the lives of people. That exercise of control has at times extended to the blocking of springs of refreshment that could assist people on their spiritual journey.

We stand now on the threshold of a momentous moment in the spiritual life of Scotland. The Church of Scotland that once had almost an iron grip on the life of the nation has all but vanished. Less than 2% of the population is involved in the institutional life of the Church of Scotland. We could lament the loss of status and power, but could it also be a source of great promise?

By relinquishing power, the church has the opportunity to stand back and allow long blocked up springs of nourishment to flow once more as pilgrim people set off on their wonder journeys hosted by faith communities offering hospitality along the way and by the landscape that contains so many stories.

Many people feel hesitant and they worry about people straying into moral deserts if we loosen our grip. However, translating Jesus's message of liberation and fulfilled humanity into the ordinary language, experience and discourse of people's daily lives leads to people encountering the same message of hope and humanity that began at the first Pentecost.

Cardiac Celts

For some in the broad Christian tradition, pilgrimage has never lost its appeal. Some people can see the idea of a revival of pilgrimage in Protestant Northern Europe as an intrusion into other people's territory. Others argue that the revival of interest in pilgrimage is little more than a 'New Age' fad. The term 'Cardiac Celt' comes from those who think that faith, in today's pick and mix culture, is whatever your heart tells you it is. There is a revival of interest in the notion of Celtic Spirituality, which many scholars denounce as entirely made up. This is not the moment to enter into a discussion about this controversy, however. Over the centuries, however, springs of spiritual nourishment have certainly run dry. That is surely the reality of our contemporary situation. In the times through which we are living, it feels right to re-visit and even re-appropriate old traditions and ancient wisdom.

Scotland alone now has over a thousand miles of recognised pilgrim routes. There is an organisation, the *Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum*, that is actively promoting the revival of pilgrimage and the infrastructure needed to support it. There is a sceptical academic view that much of what is happening in the realm of spirituality and post-modern manifestations of activities, like pilgrimage, is 'made-up'. That people are 'Cardiac Celts', in other words that faith is whatever your heart tells you it is.

> *In a conclusion to a recently published paper, the academic Marion Bowan writes. 'Pilgrimage in Scotland can be seen in relation to the broader contemporary movement in some areas of previously Protestant Northern Europe, where people in countries and denominational traditions that firmly rejected the theological underpinnings, material culture, and praxis of pilgrimage in the past, now appear to "believe in" pilgrimage as a meta-religious phenomenon'*. "Rehabilitating" Pilgrimage in Scotland:

> Heritage, Protestant Pilgrimage, and Caledonian Caminos.*(1 September 2020 Brill Publishing)*

The term 'meta religious phenomenon' is something I would contest. If you believe that the truth is fixed and nothing more can be said or discovered, then, indeed the revival of pilgrimage and other forms of spiritual practice like mindfulness and mediation can be seen as a kind of 'Mickey Mouse' religiosity.

If you believe that there is an 'orthodoxy' that puts boundaries around what is legitimate religious practice and that is all you have to adhere to, then there is nothing more to be to reformed, re-imagined or discovered anew about faith. In such a mind-set, then, of course, those of us who have revived pilgrimage as a spiritual exercise are simply engaging in making up our own religion.
However, it is my understanding that when John Knox produced the Scots Confession in 1560, he wrote:

> *'If any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it in writing; and we, upon our honour, do promise him that by God's grace we shall give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from Holy Scripture, or else we shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong.'*

The First Book of Discipline, also produced by Knox in 1560, was soon superseded by the Second Book of Discipline of 1571. A group of six John's (including Knox) was convened in order to write the second book, presumably to correct errors in the first. There is surely a lesson there about not coming to unwarranted conclusions and doctrinal dead-ends. A generation can reject something and a future generation can re-visit and rehabilitate it.

If you believe that faith and an understanding of the Divine nature is always going to be something just beyond our grasp, then we should go on reforming, exploring and discovering. Sometimes that means re-visiting old practices and acknowledging that the context in which we operate (in our case a pluralist, post-Modern Scotland) demands of us that we re-frame our understanding of what it means to journey toward the heart of God. In doing so, a new generation might just meet the Spirit of the Divine at loose in the world.

In the Book of Exodus, God appears to Moses. He sees only God's back. Human beings, with our partial and flawed understanding, only catch glimpses and whiffs of the Divine, we cannot see face-to-face. If we are open and attuned, we might just hear the whirring of angels' wings. That surely invites us to revisit discarded old ideas and to journey with a heart ready to be surprised.

The Contemporary Areopagus.

Douglas Galbraith introduced me to one of the great opportunities of the revival of pilgrimage. When St Paul stood up in the Court of the Areopagus in Athens, he introduced the ideas of the Christian faith to a sceptical public. Today, as a minority faith community, with only about 2% of the population attending worship, there is the opportunity of what Douglas describes as the chance for people on the edge of faith communities to 'overhear' worship and the things of faith in the public square.

Douglas attended a gathering in Palermo, Italy in 2007 that took the theme 'Liturgy in the Public Square'. He writes about the central activities of the Church being given the chance to reach out beyond buildings, 'where the unaffiliated and tangential believers can gather, and be in Areopagus, in that something of what and whom the church believes and affirms and is concerned about 'gets out''.

The challenge for those in the church is to find ways of reframing vocabulary, so that, as Douglas says, 'our worship planning and preaching preparation can be more consciously attuned to the frequencies of the infrequent, the seeker and even the lost'.

I recently walked the West Highland Way with a group from our Grassmarket Community Project, a community organisation we established at Greyfriars over the last 19 years to 'walk with' people on the edge of society. It is noticeable how much people who have experienced hardship and trauma of various kinds want to have conversations about spiritual and theological things. They may not feel that they would be welcome in a church service, but faith and spiritual hunger is alive amongst those who live on the edge.

Stories about the faith and spirituality of the places we passed through and any pointers to spiritual nourishment for those walking the route were noticeably

absent, however. The West Highland Way, of course, does not pretend to be a pilgrim route. But, as Douglas says of the recently inaugurated Fife Pilgrim Way, 'it is billed as a 'countryside-valuing leisure opportunity''. It is, of course, so much more than that.

Recreation as Re-creation

Anyone who reads the Canterbury Tales will realise that the only mention of Canterbury is in the title of Chaucer's book, all the meaningful action is what happens along the way, especially in hostelries as people pause for rest at the conclusion of a day of travelling. It is the act of conversation on the journey, the surprise of hearing fresh perspectives from people from faraway places, the conviviality of the evening around the meal table where weary limbs are lubricated by story-telling and the odd libation and the landscape itself that nourishes the pilgrim.

The "weight of existence" becomes less burdensome by freshly made friendship. It is also the place where the wind of the spirit, at loose in the world, can touch us, unfettered by the constraints and dogmatic limits of institutional life or by the daily round of busy, unheeding lives. Indeed, one of the great gifts of walking day after day is the meditative rhythm that develops as the pilgrim walks day after day. The mind begins to empty of all its interior chatter and a kind of empty stillness can emerge, as though the mind is finally making space for the Spirit to make a home.

It is not necessary to walk only with old friends. It is possible, especially today on one of the growing network of pilgrim routes that criss-cross Europe, to meet new people and make new friends, on the hoof, as it were. One of the joys of this is that, unlike at home, where we see our neighbour day in day out, we might make a pilgrim friend for a day and never see her again.

There is the immense freedom of personal disclosure, knowing that the things you say will stay on the journey, unlike in a settled neighbourhood where personal disclosure becomes so readily the stuff of gossip. We often never really get to know people we live beside because we do not want them to know too much about us in case they use the information against us.

Getting out into the green, anticipating the gifts that come from the conversation and kindness of the empty handed stranger, becoming one with nature by walking through a landscape and allowing it to interrogate us, engaging in open hearted dialogue along the way, such things may just save civilisation and transform our relationship with the planet and one another. Maybe journeying is our natural state. Solvitur Ambulando!

Pilgrimage is re-finding us in our contemporary parched and spiritually hungry state. As John Muir wrote more than a century ago. 'Thousands of tired and over-civilised people are beginning to find that going to the mountains is going home, that wildness is a necessity'.

Today, whatever faith tradition we are part of, if we are part of one at all, we are learning the wisdom that pilgrims soon discover. If we set out with an open and hospitable heart, we discover that reverence for the land and the natural world, and the conservation, nurturing and preservation of what is left of this fragile and beautiful earth is perhaps our greatest vocation and privilege. In these days through which we are living, the current Climate Emergency and the reality of habitat and species loss on a colossal scale, Kathleen Jamie, a contemporary Scottish writer on place, has written, 'Earth has no sorrow that earth cannot heal'.

The pilgrim rediscovers the beauty and fragility of this good earth, but she also discovers its capacity to heal and re-frame our lives as we journey through it towards the heart of the creator.

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