

## *“To be a pilgrim”*

This is the first of a short series of reflections on different aspects of our annual pilgrimage to Walsingham. I shall start with idea of pilgrimage itself.

A pilgrimage is a journey. Like any journey it is about getting from one place to another. There are two elements to this: first, that we want to be somewhere other than we are; second, that we need to travel to get there.

In the Bible, there are some famous journeys. Just think of Abraham being told to up sticks and leave home at the age of 75 to a new place which God would show him, or of the children of Israel travelling 40 years through the wilderness to the promised land. Much later, those of God’s people who had been carried away into captivity in Babylon eventually returned home. Throughout Old Testament times, the focus of pilgrimage for God’s people was of course the Temple in Jerusalem and some of the Psalms were probably sung as pilgrims travelled to Jerusalem or as they arrived at the Temple. A good example is Psalm 121:

1. I rejoiced when I heard them say:

'Let us go to God's house.'

And now our feet are standing  
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

2. Jerusalem is built as a city  
strongly compact.

It is there that the tribes go up,  
the tribes of the Lord.

3. For Israel's law it is,  
there to praise the Lord's name.

There were set the thrones of judgement  
of the house of David.

Jesus himself often made that journey, most fatefully of all in the last weeks of his earthly life and then travelled the way of the cross. Since then Christians always been drawn to Jerusalem and above all to the great church of the resurrection - rather misleadingly called in most Western languages the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is that of course, but the most important thing is that that is where Jesus rose from the dead. That’s why Eastern Christians simply call it “The Resurrection.” On pilgrimage, we are drawn by God to the place where human destiny was transformed. Every Christian pilgrimage is in some sense a journey to Jerusalem, even if it is represented by another holy place.

All those examples of biblical journeys have in common is that they are undertaken out of obedience, because the travellers have heard God calling and want to be where God wants them to be - that is Jerusalem, whether understood as a geographical place or as a symbol of our ultimate home in heaven.

Behind all this is the idea that this present life is not the final truth about us. As St Paul wrote, our citizenship is in heaven. That's where we really belong and this life is a journey towards it. Pilgrimages help remind us of this.

So as we travel to Walsingham our eyes look beyond the Holy House towards our heavenly home. It is not any kind of journey, but a journey with a purpose. We may have many particular reasons for going - for devotion, for healing, for guidance, for reconciliation, for company - but God can use any of our motives to help us face the most important question all, where is our life heading?

At the end of an earthly pilgrimage we return to the homes we occupy temporarily, but we shall have been reminded that we have an even more real and permanent home and that to reach it we need to have a sense of direction and movement in our lives. Pilgrimage is not religious tourism but an act of prayer and commitment. It is also an act of trust and longing (in the words of a Compline hymn) that through the "changes and chances of this fleeting world" we might ultimately "repose upon [God's] eternal changelessness."

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