

Pilgrimage Service, Canterbury Cathedral, Sunday October 7, 2014

Sermon by ARCHBISHOP Justin Welby.

Well congratulations to all who've done the pilgrimage. I have to declare an interest - about a dozen people coming in said: "And how far did you go?" I said "500 yards" and they said: "I'm sure it counts." Well I'm sure it doesn't - if you haven't got blisters you haven't done it. Congratulations - it's a wonderful thing, and congratulations to Canon Rowley at Winchester and Canon Clare here for having, as it were, reopened the pilgrim route from Winchester to Canterbury. It's a wonderful thing that that is there. It's a whole new world for pilgrimage - there are more people now going to Compostela on foot than there were in the Middle Ages. This is ... you are part of something in which the spirit of God is blowing and we praise God for that.

'Real love,' to quote Anita Brookner, 'is a pilgrimage. It happens when there is no strategy but it is very rare because most people are strategists.' The aim of pilgrimage is to get there, yes, but more than that it is to fall in love while doing so. That is what happened on the road to Emmaus, a quintessential and original pilgrimage in the New Testament. In a pilgrimage you know where you're trying to go but you have little or no idea about what will happen along the way, who you will meet, and what the result will be. We use the word too loosely, it's one of those 'in words': if in doubt, talk about pilgrimage - or at least I do. Pilgrimage is as much one of the core spiritual disciplines as fasting. They often go together. Pilgrimage is not to demonstrate something or to grow into a depth of relationship with each other, although that happens and is good. Pilgrimage is not to acquire merit but to acquire life.

Look at what happens in [the story about two men walking to Emmaus in the Gospel according to] Luke. The walk does not look or feel like a pilgrimage, they are in fact going the wrong way - I bet nobody did that at all over the last few days, or at least not much! Faithful Jews made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, not away from it. There is an element of Jonah about it all: they are running away from the reality of dealing with Jesus, and with the death of Jesus above all, and they bump into him but in such a way that they cannot see what is going on. Then, at the end, they see and they are changed and they move on full of good news and, unlike Jonah, they are pleased (if confused).

Starting out their mood was one of bleak despair, the loss of all hope and the absence of expectation. I expect there are some here who started the walk thinking to themselves, behind the fake smiles on their face, "What on earth do I think I'm doing here? Why did I start this or agree to come at all?" And when people go on the great, classic, long journeys - I met someone earlier who walked from London to Rome a year or two ago? Last year? - there must have been moments in the early days when you thought "That's twenty miles done and eight or nine hundred to go and I must be completely mad." And yet in the midst of their despair there is just a sense, a faint sense, that something

strange is going on. They are trying to be open to possibilities, they've heard rumours of resurrection.

Pilgrimage, and above all our journey through life, begins with possibilities, often mostly unformed and not understood, and again that is probably true for many here. Pilgrims, if we read the Canterbury Tales, which I did a year ago because I was coming here (or a year and a half ago), pilgrims set out for all kinds of reasons - for fun, for a purpose - in the hope that God would be along the way, but not usually with much certainty. And look at what happens to these two disciples. They do not draw close to God - he draws close to them. It doesn't sound like much of a difference but it is the beginning and the end of the Christian life that God comes to us, we don't find him. It's the moment which challenges despair, because, if it depends on us, we are truly lost and if it depends on him we are most certainly found. He draws close to them and things start to happen all unconsciously. Pilgrimage is not a strategy it is an encounter.

This weekend includes the launch of the Green Pilgrimage Network, it's an inter-faith movement in which Canterbury has an important part, drawing attention to our call to be good stewards of creation. We heard in one of those testimonies a few minutes ago of the sense, the benefit of walking slowly through the creation. The environment, the responsibility for where we are in the world in which we live, has disappeared from the radar of politics, buried under crisis after crisis, buried under economic stringencies. What difference will such a pilgrimage network make? We do not yet know but it is the beginnings of an encounter to celebrate and recognise that God is in every part of life. And meeting Jesus on the way the pilgrims, these two, wandering off to Emmaus in the wrong direction, are full of irritation and exasperation. "Have you no idea what's going on?" - they say to Jesus when he asks: "Why are you looking downcast?" - "Are you completely out of touch?" 'You clueless idiot' is the implication. 'Have you been living in a cave? Don't you read the paper?'

Our encounters on pilgrimage are not always obviously God. Jonah did not expect the whale. I'm sure he felt that an angel would have been a lot less trouble to set him on the second journey that he was to take. Our journeys in pilgrimage are not obvious, the way is not well marked (except of course the way from Winchester to Canterbury which is perfectly marked by Canons Clare and Rowley, just in case they think that was a sidelong swipe!) The way is not well marked. We find ourselves in places we didn't expect with people we didn't expect and quite often don't much like, if we're really honest. Pilgrimage requires us to abandon ourselves and allow God to take us, take us in the direction he chooses, and that is always hard.

And by the time they eat there is the beginnings of something new. Like the first stirrings of love, they are gripped and entranced. To meet Jesus, even unawares, always changes us even when we don't know it. Where you have sensed in these days of journeying or, in my case, twenty-five minutes of journeying, that God is at work do not leave that behind, but respond to it. The journey is not ended - go on with it, find out

more. How have you come here? what brought you to pilgrimage? What is Jesus doing in your life and mine, in our lives, today? There's some wonderful ways of going on on the journey with others. There's a wonderful course which was published last year which many parishes are doing in this diocese called 'Pilgrim', coincidentally, conveniently. Or an Alpha course. To follow on the journey in company with others and with God.

And at the end these two pilgrims are still full of questions but they have become witnesses. "We have seen the Lord," they say, and in one of the great anti-climactic moments of the New Testament the disciples in Jerusalem - when they've rushed all the way back from Emmaus - say: "Mmm, yes, so have we." Gosh, that must have been frustrating, but they're so full of it that they're not cross and exasperated as they were earlier in the day. They wonder at what God is doing. The church needs to be full of witnesses, of those who testify, it doesn't need everyone to be able to explain. Pilgrimage leads to testimonies. We are not just spiritual tourists but those who journey together to find love and, finding it, to share it with the world. Amen