

Presidential Address to the Diocesan Synod on 17 June 2008

Tewkesbury, Deerhurst, Upleadon, Newent, Tibberton, Highnam, St Oswald's Priory, Gloucester Cathedral, Hempstead, Elmore, Longney, Saul, Purton, Berkeley, North Nibley, Tyndale's Monument, Ozleworth, Boxwell, Leighterton, Tetbury, Avening, Chalford, Bisley, Edgeworth, Duntisbourne Rouse, Daglingworth, Cirencester, Ampney Crucis, Coln Rogers, Withington, Shipton Oliffe, Sevenhampton, Farmcote, Hailes (Church and Abbey), Winchcombe.

That was the Bishop's Millennium Pilgrimage. The bare facts are these: 101 miles walking, not to mention some miles on a canal, 9 full time walkers completing the entire pilgrimage, plus the back up vehicle driver cum bagman (the Bishop's Chaplain inevitably), plus two clergy able to walk about half the route with us - 12 in all, about 80 other walkers joining us for a day or an afternoon, 4 sets of school children, one of them climbing Tyndale's Monument with us, another sharing in the Eucharist at Ampney Crucis, 12 dogs at different times, only one donkey, worship or prayer in 34 churches, 17 victoria sponges, countless cups of coffee, eight episcopal homilies, for this pilgrim just one blister, 12 minutes of rain, showered upon us by a generous God at the rate of just 3 minutes a day on the last four days of the pilgrimage, 48 gin and tonics (not each) in the homes of overnight hosts.

But those are just bare facts. The toughest moments? It's between the walk up hill from Berkeley to North Nibley at the very end of a long hot day and the sheer endurance of the eighteen-mile walk on Friday from Daglingworth to Withington.

The walkers: Two ordinands, two spouses of other ordinands, two curates, two fit walkers from our sister diocese of Vasteras, making us an international and ecumenical pilgrimage, one retired priest, one between jobs wife and mother, one chaplain, one bishop. A happy band of pilgrims - Janet, Julia, Stuart, Mark, David, Craig, Ole, Ingalill, David, Josie, Aidan and Michael. As those who walk together do, we turned from a group of individuals into companions, a pilgrim company.

What was the purpose? I was and remain insistent that a pilgrimage must not have too defined an aim. You simply find yourself in company with others and you set out. You walk. You talk. You worship. You pray. You go silent for a while. You eat together. You laugh. You tell stories, sometimes your own story. You look around you. You look above you. You look inside you. And you see what it does for you. And much of it is not for sharing, at least not with those outside the experience, but it forms you, changes you, puts you down at the end in a place very different from where you began. It did that for me; I think it did it for my fellow walkers.

But this particular pilgrimage had a very public face. So for us it was also a series of encounters. Encounters with communities. We stayed in homes. We shared in parish receptions. We were received with generous welcome and hospitality in village after village, town after town. We were encouraged and affirmed by people wherever we went and I hope we did our bit of encouraging and affirming too. I want to thank all those who made us so welcome. Several times we walked into village churches full of people waiting patiently for our arrival to share in worship with us.

There were also encounters with individuals. Some were people I had invited to walk with us for a way, mainly to ensure that this was not too churchy a pilgrimage, but, so to speak,

brought the wider community of the county with us. We were launched on our way by the Lord Lieutenant and the Mayor of Tewkesbury. The Mayor of Gloucester walked with us (complete with chain of office) and received Communion with us at Highnam, the Chair of the County Council (our own Mavis Dunrossil), the Chair of Cotswold District Council, the Vice Chancellor, the Chief Fire Officer, the Chief Executive of the County, of the City, of UCAS, the MP for Stroud, the Master of the Queen's Horse, and more. And we were pursued of course by local radio and television. But then there were other walkers who came to join us, churchwardens, clergy, parishioners, sometimes seeing us off their territory! And all of these joined in the walking and the talking and the worshipping and the eating and I hope and pray it touched their lives too.

The excuse, of course, was the millennium of the county of Gloucestershire, the historians telling us that it was in 1007 that Gloucestershire took on something like its present shape and this pilgrimage the last event to mark that millennium. We walked with the new Gloucestershire flag at our head - with the blue for the Severn and the Avon, the stone colour for the Cotswolds (ours has faded a bit) and the green for the forests and the fields. I was glad to be celebrating the county of Gloucestershire. It has more of a sense of cohesion, identity, than many I have known, and commands a place in our loyalties and affections in a way that a region can never do. And the logic of our route was to travel to as many of the Saxon minster towns of a 1000 years ago as we could - Tewkesbury, Newent, Gloucester, Berkeley, Tetbury, Cirencester, Winchcombe - and to visit some of the churches with significant Saxon or early Norman features - Deerhurst, Newent, Berkeley, Ozleworth, Duntisbourne Rouse, Daglingworth, Withington, Farmcote, Hailes and more.

So what are my immediately reflections on my seven days of pilgrimage?

One. It is a most beautiful county. Don't ever take that for granted. Stunning views every day from places cars cannot reach. For me the most beautiful of all looking north over Winchcombe while walking from Sevenhampton on to Farmcote and Hailes. But God's creation in its infinite variety. Praise the Lord for that and pray we preserve it, value it and allow it to enrich our lives.

Two. We have been given a quite wonderful resource in church buildings that are holy spaces where the presence of God is tangible. I know that the very same buildings can also be a burden, are often not the right space for doing our mission or even for doing some of our worship. I know that some of them are in the wrong place and cannot sustain a regular worshipping community. I know that some of them ought not to be parish churches. But I have had reinforced for me that they are holy places, hallowed by prayer, scripture and sacrament down the ages, that they enshrine our Christian heritage, that within them you sense the presence of God and the praises of the saints, and that we dispose of them at our peril. We need to love and treasure them, pray in them, seek help with their upkeep and do all we can to draw people into them, for within them some will turn from tourists into pilgrims.

Three. Christian hospitality and welcome is a wonderful thing. So many of the places we visited had Benedictine roots and hospitality has always been such a feature of that tradition. We experienced warmth of welcome and hospitality in every place. You may say that was because there was a bishop in the company. I hope that isn't true, but that our church communities are always welcoming and hospitable ones. I am sure that any growth in the life

of the Church must start from creating and enhancing a culture of welcome and hospitality to all those who come near us, even those we see a long way off and go out to meet them.

Four. The Christian rhythm of communal prayer is a wonderful resource and treasure and we need to create opportunities for people to clock into it for a while. On our pilgrimage we said and sung Morning and Evening Prayer and the Eucharist in a different church on each occasion along the way. We had lovely music composed for us by one of our ordinands. We offered intercessions for every community where we stopped. We prayed for those who walked with us, often by name. We gathered either in a semi-circle or in crowd, depending on numbers, around the altar to celebrate the Eucharist. We stopped at every other church and at the door prayed "Peace to this house from God our heavenly Father, peace to this house from his Son who is our peace, peace to this house from the Holy Spirit, the Life-giver, the Encourager" before going in to sense the presence of God and to pray. And all the pilgrims were renewed and refreshed by that opportunity to walk for while within the discipline of the regular round of liturgical and communal prayer, deeply scriptural, wonderfully prayerful, gloriously sacramental - companions, remember, are literally those who share bread. We had our own pilgrimage lectionary, following the Israelite people on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land and Paul from his conversion on the Damascus Road to his arrival in Jerusalem, together with the great journey stories of the gospels - the journey of the magi, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem with the 12 year old Jesus, and the walk to Emmaus. But it was not only the pilgrims. The people who joined us were deeply moved by sharing in worship that had both depth and vitality. And I want us to make those experiences more available to more people more often.

It has been a delight to be a pilgrim and I think it has reinforced for me what it means to be every day a Christian pilgrim on the journey to Light and Love eternal. Of course I know it was not the most challenging of pilgrimages. We did not pass through a wilderness. We did not suffer from cold. We did not go hungry. We did not get lost. And I know we were in danger in our rural idyll of forgetting that most people in our diocese live the urban life. We didn't walk many city streets. We did stop to think about the fact that the Bible pictures heaven, not as a garden, but as a city, though a city with a river through the middle and trees for the healing of the nations. It was a limited experience, but a good one, and I thank you for your interest and your prayers and for your reticence in not telling me that in succeeding in walking 100 miles I might fall into the sin of pride. I thank all the communities that we visited for helping to make it an unforgettable week for the pilgrims.

+Michael Gloucester: