

Editorial – To Be a Pilgrim

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The way of being to which pastors are called is a way of ‘becoming’. There is an inner dynamic of growth and development. There is nothing static about the Christian life. We are travellers engaged on ‘the long walk’ to God. This phrase came to mind when I was thinking of Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*. There, at the end of the book, he wrote: “I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made many missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk”.¹¹⁷ It seems to me that there are parallels here with the Christian life.

Not surprisingly with the paradigm of the Exodus, the early Christians came to see themselves as “strangers and pilgrims” (Hebs 11.13 AV: see 1 Pet 2.11 AV), as they made their way home to God. Our English word ‘pilgrim’ is derived from the Latin *perigrinatus*, which was originally used to describe somebody who had travelled abroad, but it came to be used of people who were on a journey toward God. Alas, modern English versions have removed the concept of pilgrimage and speak of Christians being “strangers and foreigners” (NRSV) or “foreigners and refugees” (GNB) or “foreigners and strangers” (NIV). Indeed, some commentators suggest that we have here a term for ‘resident aliens’. However, while this may be true, these modern translations lack the sense of movement which is present, where the author says that the heroes of faith were “seeking a homeland” (Hebs 11.14); and “looking for the city that is to come (Hebs 13.14). As Christians we are on a journey – or in the words of the old hymn, “We are marching to Zion”.

This picture of the Christian life as pilgrimage has been taken up by many Christian authors since. In the early 5th century,

¹¹⁷ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, (Little & Brown, London 1994) 354

Augustine of Hippo wrote *The City of God* in which he distinguished between the “city of this world” and the city of God”. He wrote: “As long as he [the citizen of the heavenly city] is in this mortal body, [he] is a pilgrim in a foreign land, away from God: therefore he walks by faith and not by sight... While this Heavenly City is on pilgrimage in this world, she calls out citizens from all nations and so collects a society of aliens, speaking all images.”

In the 17th century, John Bunyan wrote what is the most well-known work of Baptist spirituality, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Christian sets out on a journey to the Celestial City. He travels through the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair, and Doubting Castle. On his way he meets such people as Evangelist, Mr Facing-both-ways, Worldly Wiseman, the Interpreter, Greatheart, Ignorance, Mr Talkative, Madame Bubble, Vain-hope, and Mrs Know-nothing. Finally he passes through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and in the company of Hope comes at last to the gates of the Celestial City.¹¹⁸

In the late 1980s, the British Inter-Church Process, which resulted in the Roman Catholic Church becoming part of the ‘Churches Together’ movement, was entitled *Not Strangers but Pilgrims* – for “we are strangers no longer, but pilgrims on the way to your kingdom”.

In 1994 Cardinal Hume wrote *To Be a Pilgrim: A Spiritual Notebook*, where he said: “We are made to know God, to love Him and serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next. This is the point of pilgrimage”.¹¹⁹

More recently this image of the Christian life as one of pilgrimage has been developed by the adventurer Rob Lilwall who concludes his account of walking 3000 miles across China with the following reflection: “I belong to a faith, at the heart of which is the claim that I am completely loved, and which also calls me to live courageously as a pilgrim. On this pilgrimage of life there will be times when I fall down. But instead of giving up or becoming bitter, I must get up and keep walking and reject the view that life

¹¹⁸ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678; Part II 1684)

¹¹⁹ Basil Hume, *To Be A Pilgrim: A Spiritual Notebook* (SPCK, London 1994).26.

is all about winning. Rather, I must keep a soft heart which, despite the tests and trials, is learning to love".¹²⁰

Like the journey made by Rob Lilwall, it is a challenging journey full of twists and turns, ups and downs. It is not a smooth journey. The question arises: how do we – as ministers - cope with those tough times when everything seems to go wrong. Do we become hard and cynical – or will we remain soft-hearted and trusting? Alas, even some ministers develop a ‘chip on the shoulder’ and become angry and bitter, as they focus on what they believe to be the ‘unfairnesses’ of life. They forget that life is not about ‘winning’ in the here and now, but about keeping going, whatever, and so they fail to allow the so-called ‘unfairnesses’ to become opportunities to grow in grace (see Rom 5.3-5; Jas 1.2-4). In our call to be pilgrims, our focus is to be on the future hope, and not on past hurts or present difficulties. In the words of Michael Saward’s modern paraphrase of John Bunyan’s great hymn, “Who would true valour see”

*Though evil powers intend
To break our spirit,
We know we at the end
Shall life inherit.
So fantasises, away!
Why fear what others say?
We’ll labour night and day
To be his pilgrims*

The journey can be tough, but where there is faith, God can sustain and strengthen. To quote the Psalmist, as the pilgrims pass through “the dry valley of Baca, it becomes a place of springs; the autumn rain fills it with pools” (84.6). Dry valleys do not literally suddenly become filled with refreshing pools simply because pilgrims are passing through, but beneath the poetry is the conviction that God makes all the difference to the pilgrim life. Where God is looked to, troubles are transformed, new strength is received. Instead of getting weaker on the journey, the pilgrims actually “grow stronger as they go” (84.7).

¹²⁰ *Walking Home From Mongolia: Ten Million Steps Through China from the Gobi Desert to the South China Sea* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 2013).