

Pilgrimage

a journey within

Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

WHEN I DECIDED TO STOP IN AND VISIT THE SMALL village church in Lastingham, Yorkshire, I had no idea that the place was of any significance. I hadn't set out on a pilgrimage. I hadn't researched the site or prepared myself to have any particular kind of experience. I just happened to be passing by there with my brother-in-law. I went in and decided to go down into the crypt.

As I entered into the low, dim stone space, I actually fell on the ground because of the overwhelming sense of *holiness*. I nearly passed out. I had no idea what was happening or why. I thought, "What on earth? Why am I feeling this?"

After I came back up into the church and looked around, I discovered that this church was where Saint Chad and Saint Cedd, missionaries to the Angles, had established their monastery. And Saint Cedd is buried, still, down in the crypt. My experience there was utterly unexpected; I almost couldn't believe it. Yet it was also undeniable. The sense of the holy was so close, it fell upon me like a huge weight.



"People come to kneel where prayer has been valid," wrote T.S. Eliot.

Eliot not only kneeled, he fully collapsed - on the floor of our own Holy Spirit Chapel - during an early morning Eucharist in the 1930s. He was the only visitor in the Chapel with the Brothers. Suddenly, during the consecration of the elements, he experienced the presence of God so powerfully, so heavily, he collapsed under it.

I love these stories because they remind me that while churches can offer sanctuary, they also can be incredibly dangerous places of encounter. We should post warnings on the door: *Enter at your own risk*. If you don't want to risk an encounter that might change everything, then you might want to stay away!

Take Paul Claudel, the French playwright. Not a believer, he went one day into the vast cathedral, Notre-Dame de Paris. Claudel stood, half hiding behind a pillar, watching the Mass. He later wrote that the pillars were like great trees in a forest, and, as he stood there, something extraordinary took place. He said it was as if the Holy Spirit was hiding in that forest, and it suddenly ambushed him. At once he believed and fell to his knees.

Notre-Dame de Paris, this Monastery Chapel in Cambridge, Saint Mary's in Lastingham, Yorkshire: it's not just aesthetics that gives such churches their power. These places are *holy*, which simply means that they have been consecrated to God. They are places where generations have come seeking God; where men and women have been *ambushed* by God and can never be the same again. They are places where thousands upon thousands of prayers have been offered; where solemn vows have been made: monastic vows, baptismal vows, marriage vows, ordination vows. It's almost as if the very walls have become impregnated with prayer and saturated with God's presence. The holiness of such places is not measurable, and yet it's undeniable. We enter and, ready or not, God is already there, waiting for us.



We believe, of course, that God is everywhere. God can be found on a mountaintop, as well as in a valley; in the dark and in the light; in a holy place and in the gutter. The place where we encounter God is actually not *material*, for God of course is immaterial. Seen this way, there is no need to go anywhere at all to experience God.

And yet, as Christians, we also believe in the Incarnation. John's Gospel tells us that "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" or, as another translation has it, "the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us" (Jn 1:14). Within the more Catholic traditions of the Christian church, believers pray in front of the tabernacle – where the Sacrament is placed – out of a desire to be close to the sacramental presence of Christ, the Christ who became flesh and dwelt among us. We believe that Christ is physically *there*, in the Sacrament. Even though God is everywhere, we embodied creatures do experience God (like everything else) in our bodies and through our senses. Our sacramental practice within the Church is reflective of this; it invites us to experience God's presence *somatically*, in our flesh, with our taste and with our touch. The God who became flesh comes to us again in the flesh every time we hold out our hands and "*Take, eat*" the Sacrament.

And so, too, there are physical *places* where we feel that God can be experienced in a uniquely powerful way. "Thin places" we call them, where the veil between Heaven and earth is thinned, somehow. Where – even if you aren't expecting it, or are unprepared for it – you can become aware of an almost overwhelming sense of God's presence, as I did at Lastingham.

These places of divine encounter are holy places with the power to transform us, just as the Sacraments do, by bringing us into contact with the living God. In these places of encounter, God's presence is so palpable that it's actually very easy to pray. We can be very vulnerable. We feel close to the Source of Life.

Such places of encounter become sites of pilgrimage.



While pilgrimage rose as a widespread devotional practice in the Middle Ages, humans have been practicing pilgrimage for as long as we have experienced and commemorated encounters with God.

Think of that wonderful story in Genesis 28, the story of Jacob's ladder. Jacob falls asleep and dreams of a ladder ascending up to Heaven, with angels going up and down. When he awakens, he knows that he's been visited by God. He says, "*This is none other than the house of God, and this is the Gate of Heaven.*" He calls that place *Bethel*, "the house of God."

What's significant is that Jacob is sleeping on a rock as a pillow. When he wakes up and realizes that he's been visited by God, he takes that rock, makes it into an altar, and pours oil on it. As word spreads, people begin to come to that place. That site becomes holy because that's where God came down and touched a human. It's a place where, to quote T.S. Eliot again, we "*apprehend the point of intersection of the timeless with time.*" The transcendent God has actually broken through into our time-bound world, and we can point to where it happened. There, right there. Archbishop Michael Ramsey used to call these "*little anticipations of Heaven,*" moments of transcendence. They can happen in sacred places, they can happen on pilgrimage, and they can happen in the daily journey of our everyday life.



As Christians, we are a pilgrim people.

Pilgrimage is woven into the very roots of our faith, beginning with Abraham, the first pilgrim. In Genesis 12, God calls Abram (whom God will later call Abraham) to leave his house and journey to a land unknown. "*Leave your country and your kindred and your father's house, and go on a journey to a foreign land.*" So Abram becomes nomadic. He pitches a tent each night; the next morning, he takes up the tent pegs and moves on. I think that this "Abrahamic" spirit is fundamental to our Judeo-Christian tradition: we are pilgrim people, from the very start.

The thread picks up with the most formative experience of salvation in the Hebrew Scriptures: the story of the Exodus, which is essentially a forty-year pilgrimage. God's people are enslaved in Egypt, brutalized by Pharaoh, and God raises up Moses to be their savior. And Moses leads them on an epic journey across the desert, to the Promised Land.

This thread continues throughout the Gospels, as Jesus calls disciples to follow him away from their homes and all that they have known, on a journey into the unknown:

"He saw Simon and Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said, 'Follow me.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him." (Mk 1:16-18)

"He saw James and John who were in their boat mending the nets. He called them and they left their father Zebedee and followed him." (Mt 4:21-22)

“He called the rich young man and said, ‘Sell everything that you have and follow me.’”
(Mt 19:21)

“He saw a tax collector called Levi and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up, left everything, and followed him.” (Lk 5:27-28)

Jesus’ uncompromising command to leave *everything* – and indeed the *longing* to leave everything to follow Jesus – inspired many of the first monastics: Saint Anthony and the Desert Fathers in the fourth century, who left all their property and wealth behind, to head out into the western deserts of Egypt.

And in the early Celtic Christian tradition, such men as Patrick and Columba embraced what was known as “white martyrdom” when they left their homes to travel to foreign lands, leaving everything behind, to follow Jesus. As a contemporary writer put it, *“They sailed into the white sky of morning, into the unknown, never to return.”*

While most of us are not called to such extreme acts of renunciation for the sake of following Jesus, yet those words in the Gospel are surely addressed to each one of us: *“Leave everything and follow me, and you will receive eternal life.”*

This command contains a deep truth for each of us: the first step in our pilgrimage will always be a movement *away* from, a renunciation of the familiar. Unless we let go of the familiar, the safe, the secure, unless we take the risk of becoming vulnerable, we cannot grow.

This is one of the main reasons why pilgrims set out for holy destinations: they are longing to take a journey of transformation. To do so, they literally leave behind the familiar and the known, and physically journey into a place and a future that only God can envision. The pilgrim’s physical journey can “jumpstart” the transformation, as it were, through the radical act of leaving behind the world that is known. It’s no accident that so much of the great literature of the world picks up on this very theme of the hero’s transformative journey; from the story of Abraham in Genesis, to the great epics, *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, even *The Lord of the Rings*. A pilgrimage of transformation requires first that we *leave everything behind*, and set out on a journey that will lead to new life.



Simply leaving home is not enough, of course.

Physical pilgrimage has value primarily for its ability to inspire *inner* change. In this, the physical journey of pilgrimage symbolizes (and often catalyzes) the spiritual journey that we are called to take *within*. In her wonderful treatment of medieval pilgrimage, *Pilgrimage of the Heart*, Sr. Benedicta Ward, SLG, catalogues four possible stages along the spectrum between physical and spiritual pilgrimage:

1. *It was possible to stay and to stay, in other words to be completely lazy and attempt nothing, go*

nowhere, stay shut within the walls of self, to ignore pilgrimage altogether.

2. *It was possible to stay and yet to go, by undertaking the pilgrimage of the heart while remaining in one place, which was the fundamental monastic way.*
3. *It was possible to go inwardly by longing and desire in the heart and to confirm this by outward pilgrimage with the feet, to be a true pilgrim.*
4. *It was possible to go on pilgrimage with feet, but not with heart, as a tourist, a runaway, or a drop-out from responsibility, a curious inquirer, in which case there had been no real movement; the traveler had taken the shell of self with him and whatever its name it was not in essence a pilgrimage at all.*

Of this last kind of pilgrimage, the great biblical translator Saint Jerome observed, “*It is better to live for Jerusalem than to journey to Jerusalem.*” Better to stay home and be changed in heart, than to journey with your feet yet remain internally unmoved.



Whether or not each of us eventually chooses to embark on a physical pilgrimage at some point in our life, we are *all* of us called to set out, ever afresh, on the *inner* kind of pilgrimage, the pilgrimage of the heart. We are called, in the words of Jerome, to “*live for Jerusalem,*” as we follow Christ on a journey of growth and transformation.

“*Come follow me. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*” (Jn 14:6). Christianity has never been a static body of doctrine, but rather is a dynamic way of life. The first term used in the New Testament to describe Christians is “followers of the Way,” because of Jesus’ compelling invitation to take to the road, to make all of life into a continuous pilgrimage. Monica Furlong, in her book *Traveling In*, wrote, “*The religious person is the one who believes that life is about making some kind of journey. The non-religious person is the one who believes there is no journey to make.*”

The journey – whether it be the journey of Abraham or Moses, Jesus’ disciples or medieval pilgrims – has never been simply about traveling across physical space toward a holy site. Every outward journey of pilgrimage always has as its true goal an *inner* journey of transformation.

The essence of pilgrimage, then, is the journey *within*. Therefore the essential pilgrimage to undertake is not the one of the feet, but the one of the heart. For this reason, I love the story that Sr. Benedicta recounts of the early Egyptian recluse, who fell under criticism for living a sedentary life. “*Why are you sitting here and doing nothing?*” one monk asked her. She replied, “*I am not doing nothing; I am on a journey.*”

We can embark on the most amazing journey without ever leaving our room. Every day Jesus

calls us to embrace new life, and that means to let go, to leave behind what has become too comfortable, our habits, our compulsions. It means each morning awakening to a new day and saying to God, “Where do you want to lead me today on the journey of life? What are you asking me to leave behind? How are you asking me to *change*?”

“*To live is to change,*” wrote Cardinal Newman, “*and to be perfect is to have changed often.*”



Jesus’ continuous call to grow and change can make us feel insecure and, frankly, scared. I suppose, if we are honest, we’re not always very keen to take to the road. And yet that is what this resurrection Life is all about. “*For here we have no abiding city, for we seek the city which is to come*” (Heb 13:14).

As pilgrims, we are not simply wanderers. This pilgrimage of ours is not just *away* from our old life, nor is it solely *into* the depths of our hearts. Our journey is actually *toward* something very specific. “*We seek the city which is to come.*” We are headed *somewhere*. We have a specific *destination*: our heavenly home. Our pilgrimage journey is toward God!

This is the fundamental difference between traveling through life as a pilgrim and as a tourist. To the tourist, every part of the journey has equal value, whereas the pilgrim definitely has a goal. To understand our life as a pilgrimage is to see this life as *teleological*: to know it actually has an end, and a *goal*, in Heaven. God is the end of our journey – both our destination and our goal.



One thing that can be very helpful as we press along on this journey, is periodically to stop and make a sort of “map” of the road we’ve traveled and the road ahead. Ultimately, we know that our destination is God; yet like any traveler pressing on along an unknown road, we may need to check in and reorient ourselves from time to time, to be sure that we haven’t taken off on the wrong path.

Honestly take stock of your journey so far: *Where am I now, where have I been, and where do I feel I should be going? Ask yourself: Where do I feel God is drawing me now? What is the vision I have of the person God wants me to become? What are the things in my life right now which are stopping me from realizing that vision, or dulling my sight? Where am I being pulled off the path?*

It doesn’t matter how far along the path you are. And if you have come off the way, that’s ok too; you simply need to get back on it. “To repent” in the Greek is *metanoia*, which means to “turn around.” If you find you’ve gone astray, then turn around! Retrace your steps to the last time you knew that you were in the right spot, and start again from there.

This exercise can be particularly helpful when we undertake it with a companion, someone we trust, who knows us and loves us, and who also understands the things of the Spirit. Find someone who can act as a guide in interpreting your map and pointing you toward the next step on the road. In this, the Road to Emmaus offers such a wonderful image for this pilgrim life (see Lk 24:13-27). The disciples set out on pilgrimage to Emmaus. Suddenly, Christ draws near to them, but they don't recognize him, until they reflect on the teaching the stranger has shared. So too, we need to be open and expectant that, along the route, somebody may draw close to us, and they may *be the Christ*, speaking words which set us on the path to life again, by renewing our vision.



Wherever we are on our life journey, we are *never* alone. The story of Emmaus promises us that we are always joined by another, the Risen One. He always walks beside us. When we are at the extremity of our strength, he is with us; in the wilderness of ice or the furnace of the fire; in our times of greatest loneliness or trial, Emmaus reassures us, "You are not alone: you have a companion."

The Risen Christ walks by our side, but he also goes ahead of us. In John's Gospel, we read, "*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places: if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?*" (Jn 14:2). The word used by John for "dwelling place" is very interesting. It's the Greek word *monai*, which doesn't mean a "house," and certainly not a "mansion," but rather a "stopping place," like a wayside shelter, where a traveler could rest a night or two on a journey (like the mountain huts you find in the White Mountains). In the East, it was the custom for travelers to send someone ahead to prepare the next shelter along the road, so that when the travelers arrived, they might find comfort, as well as shelter.

Jesus, in this famous passage, is promising that *he* is that person for *us*. He is just ahead of us on our life's journey: he prepares the way for us. Even though the next step of our journey may seem scary, "*I have gone before you to prepare a place for you.*"

As comforting as this image is, we should also hear in it something of a prod. We often reach a stage in our life where we have found a very *comfortable* wayside shelter, and decide that we'd like to stop there for good. We begin putting up curtains and might even stow our pack under the bed! But that is to forget our Abrahamic roots, which call us to take out the tent pegs in the morning, and move on.

We are a pilgrim people. Christ urges us on: "Get back on the road. Don't be afraid. For I will always be the one walking by your side – and I will always go before you to prepare the way."



In this pilgrim life, we are called to an ongoing journey, with God and toward God. And

yet there is this amazing sense that, the more we travel away from what we know, the more *familiar* the landscape will become. My journey does not actually lead me *away* from myself, but *toward* it. I am called by Jesus to become more and more the Geoffrey that God had in mind when God created me. And so, too, are you: called to become the person God made you to be. We have this little time on Earth for that to happen, to become who we *truly* are, so that when we finally get to Heaven, it won't be such a shock!

To quote T.S. Eliot once more, "*The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and to know the place for the first time.*" At the end of our journey, we will find ourselves, finally, home.

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