



Fifth Sunday of Easter

6th May 2012

John Dunnill

Acts 8: 26-40; 1 John 4: 7-21; John 15: 1-8

Alleluia, Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed, alleluia!*

I don't go to the cinema all that often, so it was mainly by chance ten days ago that I got to see the new film called *The Way*, which I hope is still showing at the Luna. The 'way' in the title is the Camino de Santiago, the pilgrim road through northern Spain, 800 kilometres long, ending in the far North West, at Compostella. People have walked that road for 1500 years, to worship at the shrine of St James, who according to legend is buried there. It's a path that a number of us here have walked, some more than once, though not me.

The film is a gentle and lovely tale about pilgrimage. It concerns a dentist in his sixties – a very unlikely pilgrim – whose son is killed in an accident, walking the trail. The father travels from California to collect his son's remains and finds himself there, with his son's pack and equipment and sets off on the way his son would have gone, taking his son's ashes and scattering them gradually along the way. On the way he meets up with a curious assortment of people, all equally unlikely pilgrims, all trying to work out what they are looking for.

Though I haven't been on this Way, it put me in mind of other experiences of pilgrimage, and the meetings you have on such a journey. I think of conversations on the coach travelling to Taizé; people I've met on the ferry going to Iona; the delight of travelling, and arriving, and being there.

There is, not always but often, a special quality of meeting in such times, as if being on such a way enables you to meet perfect strangers as if you know them well, at some deeper level. And always there's the shared question, 'Why am I here? What am I hoping for?'

A pilgrimage is a journey with a purpose, though the purpose may not be at all clear. For the travellers in this film it is not the official purpose, the shrine of St James, that draws them (though it draws others). What draws them is a sense that there is, ahead of them, a place where life has meaning, and that is what they are seeking, each in their own way.

When asked why they're walking, they give reasons that don't make sense – one says 'I'm trying to lose weight!' (800 kms!). It's as if the outward reasons conceal some deeper, more private reason, which maybe they don't yet know. So they walk the path to find the reason why they're walking the path, and hopefully they find it.

Not all pilgrimage has to be on this grand scale, of course. Yesterday with others around the city I was walking the labyrinth, and walking a labyrinth is a little

pilgrimage. A famous one is laid out on the floor of the cathedral at Chartres. It was put there about the year 1200, precisely to be a focus for pilgrims who could not get as far as Compostella or Jerusalem.

People often confuse a labyrinth with a maze, but they're not the same. A maze is designed to puzzle you and stop you finding the centre, but a labyrinth has only one path and it takes you, by many twists and turns, to the centre. It is a centred space, and the effect of walking it, first in, then out, is to step out of our muddled and confused lives and find a way to our own centre, whatever that means for each of us. There are a number of labyrinths in Perth, and if you haven't experienced this little form of pilgrimage I commend it to you.

But in a sense you made a little pilgrimage when you came to church this morning: it's a choice you made (most people don't) to journey, to what we hope in some sense is a holy place. If you came on foot (if only because of the lack of space in the car park), you may be more aware of it as journey, with a beginning and an end. However you got here, what were you hoping for?

Thinking about pilgrimage, I turn to the story in Acts chapter 8, which is a story about pilgrimage, and about a Spirit-guided meeting on the way. It's a story which I think has a historical core, although it's been developed by Luke in his imaginative way, with a certain warmth and humour. The central character has been on pilgrimage, of course – we're told 'he had come to Jerusalem to worship' – and he has come from Ethiopia, about as far away (in Biblical terms) as you can imagine. He's an exotic figure: a grand personage in charge of the Queen's treasury, sitting in his spacious chariot and presumably accompanied by servants and horses, a weird sight to find travelling the road across the desert.

He is also a foreigner – black, perhaps, from the land of the burning sun – answering the call in Isaiah ch 2: 'In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be raised above the hills and all nations shall stream to it' [2: 2]. Although a foreigner, he is surely a Jew by religion, a convert to this faith. Isn't he fulfilling what Isaiah says?:

'Many peoples shall come and say
 "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
 to the house of the God of Jacob,
 that he may teach us his ways
 and that we may walk in his path"'.
 "

Yes, that's what he has been looking for, on his way. And he is reading the scroll of Isaiah as he travels.

But there's also something else which gives a certain tension to his journey. Although he's a Jew, by religion, he is a eunuch. This presumably means he began life as a slave, and was castrated as a house-slave within the harem; but now he's risen to high rank. As a eunuch he would not be considered physically whole, in Jewish terms, and the law in Deut 23: 2 would exclude him from participation in the assembly. (If you want the details – and I'm sure you do want the details – it says 'No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis has been

cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord'.) So why would he go to Jerusalem?

But a later chapter in Isaiah, ch. 56, has a word of hope, you might think specially for his condition. It reads:

‘Do not let the eunuch say “I am just a dry tree”,
for thus says the Lord:
to the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths and hold fast my covenant
I will give, in my house, and within my walls,
a monument and a name
that is better than sons and daughters’ [Is 56: 3-5].

Doesn't that give, especially for a eunuch, a motivation to make the long pilgrimage to the house of the LORD, as the place where there is a promise of acceptance and blessing?

Did he receive such a welcome? We don't know, of course. But we do know that in those times the Qumran sect admitted no one who was not whole; and it's extremely unlikely that the priests at Jerusalem would let the law of Moses be overturned by a passage from the prophet: more likely they would say 'Prophet schmopphet, can't you read?' and point to Deut 23: 2. So it is quite probable that his triumphal and very public arrival at the temple in Jerusalem was a complete disaster, and what he experienced there was total rejection and shame.

Well, we shouldn't put too much weight on such speculation, or trying to work out what the historical core of the story might be. There is an air of disappointment and desolation about this man, for whatever reason.

But it's a feature of any pilgrimage that when we arrive at our destination, even if it is *everything* we hoped for, we are pulled up short. We've been so focussed on this one place, getting there, that actually arriving is a bit of a shock. We think, 'Is that it, then? What next? – What day is it?' We have to find our way back into our life.

So, for whatever reason, it's in a reflective mood that Philip finds him, when, as Luke tells us, he's prompted by the Spirit to join him. And he's reading from that same prophet, Isaiah. Coming down from Jerusalem, did he go back to Is 56 to make sure he hadn't misread that promise about 'a monument and a name'? And perhaps that's why, flicking back a few pages, he found the mysterious words of Is 53? –

‘Like a lamb led to the slaughter...
he does not open his mouth;
in his humiliation justice was denied him:
who can describe his generation?’

What was it that drew him to just these words? 'Humiliation, justice denied, who can describe his generation?' – Did he think the prophet was talking about him?

Plainly he did not think that these were just words in an ancient text, mildly interesting maybe but of no real importance; and Luke, recounting this, agrees.

These are to be read as divine words speaking of life now. But who are they about?

For Philip, and for the early church in general, this passage of the Suffering Servant was a mysterious prophecy of Jesus:

‘the Lamb led to the slaughter, ...
by his stripes we are healed, ...
when he makes his life an offering for sin
and bears the iniquities of many’.

And so Philip opened his mouth and used this text to tell the Ethiopian eunuch the good news about Jesus, crucified and risen.

When Philip had asked him if he understood what he was reading he said ‘How can I unless someone guides me?’ – literally ‘unless someone shows me the road’. This is what Philip is doing, acting as guide on the road, the road which opens up in this text.

This is where the real pilgrimage begins, only he had to come all this way, clutching the scroll of Isaiah, before he could learn how to read it. Despite his physical disfiguration, this was a man of power and splendour and he had to experience humiliation [or anyway the desolation of wondering ‘Is that all there is?’] before he could discover how God works in the place of pain and humiliation. Now he could hear the message of the Son of God who ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and being found in human likeness he humbled himself and became obedient even to the point of death, death on a cross’ [Phil 2: 7-8].

It’s when we get down to our real humanity that God can meet us and work in us. Isn’t that what a pilgrimage is about? (or a retreat or quiet day) – putting off the masks and pretences we use everyday, and letting our real life open up in us. That’s why it’s important to walk a pilgrim way, if we can, rather than be whisked to our destination by bus. Whatever grounds us in our humanity sets us free from pride and pretence, opens up in us a well of compassion for ourselves and for others, and with that compassion comes peace. It’s in that inner place of compassion that we meet the holy one, the power of mercy and compassion whom we call God. He goes with us on the way.

The Ethiopian’s way led him from discovering the grace of God in this text, first down into the waters of baptism, in a muddy pool beside the road. That would mean going into the water naked, revealed in his physical disfiguration. What would his servants have thought of this shameful proceeding? Would he even care? And having entered into the death of Christ in baptism, shared the sacrament of humiliation, the casting off of the old life to receive new life, as he came up out of the water he was set free from his questioning and his gloom. We’re told ‘he went on his way rejoicing’. And so can we.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed, alleluia!*