

Readings: Psalm 84, 2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18

What is the furthest distance you have ever walked?

Why did you do it?

Many of us need to have a very good reason to walk more than we have to. Although there are those who like the Proclaimers are happy to walk 500 miles, then 500 more for someone – so that they can wake up beside, get drunk with and do a bit of hawering with the person they love.

So 1,000 miles for someone you love – how long would that take? Average walking speed 3mph, so if you walked 8 hours a day, that makes 24,25 mile per day. At that rate it would take 40 days to walk 1,000 miles. It sounds good in a song – maybe a bit more challenging in reality!

Our psalm today was written for the people of Israel who would walk to the temple in Jerusalem for 3 special religious festivals each year. This song is one that is ascribed to the Korahites – these were the descendants of a man named Korah whose job it was to serve in the temple and their speciality was leading the choral and orchestral music for the worship in the temple. In all there are 25 psalms attributed to them.

The people who walked to Jerusalem for these special festivals would sing these songs to encourage themselves along the way, to keep their spirits up, to keep their focus on why they were making this long pilgrimage.

Many of you will know that at Finn's Place we have occasional pilgrimages where we walk to a site of special interest. These pilgrimages usually only last a day, but there are other pilgrimage routes that people can follow which can take many weeks to complete.

The writer Stephen Platten in his book 'Pilgrims' suggests that there are six essential elements of pilgrimage – and we have used these in our pilgrimages from Finn's Place.

We're going to go through our reading today to see where each of these elements can be found in our Psalm.

The first element is: *Our roots: where home is, where we have come from, our spiritual and material home.*

Langside 23 10 2016, Psalm 84, 2 Tim 4:16-18

In this psalm we can see clearly that these people knew themselves to be the God's people.

***My king, my God, hear my prayer.***

This God they are going to worship is their God, and they are his people. They knew who they were, and they also knew where they had come from.

The story of the Old Testament is that the people of Israel only came into existence because of the miracle of God in giving an old barren woman and her old husband a child. Israel reminded itself regularly that it was the work of God that brought them into being – their very existence was the work of God – and it was this that was the reason for their relationship with God. They knew where they had come from, they knew how they had come into being.

We may look at our roots and think that the physical place of our birth and the circumstances of our lives are what determine who we are – it might be our parents, our nationality, our religion.

But we are reminded in scripture that before all of these things had any effect on us that our origin is in God – it is he who has made us who we are and often much of our lifelong pilgrimage is trying to discover who we really are in the light of this fact. Our physical heritage of genes, nationality and religion are not the ultimate determining factor of who we are, but rather who God has created us to be, and this sometimes gets blurred by these physical and circumstantial factors.

The second element is: *The people who accompany us: communities that we are part of, and sometimes they are not necessarily the people we would have chosen.*

In this psalm we can see that although this is a very personal journey, that there is also the element of the company of others who are also on this journey. These people are travelling to Jerusalem as a group so that together they might be in the presence of God.

There may well have been those who walked out of a sense of duty, or in fear of what might happen to them on the way, or who walked reluctantly – but they all still walked the journey. And as they journeyed they would all share in the joys and struggles of the pilgrimage.

Similarly – we are all here this morning because we are all on a spiritual journey – for some of us the journey is an adventure, for others it feels like a chore. But the fact remains – we are still all on this journey together, the people around us are our fellow pilgrims.

The third element is: *Sustenance for the journey: scripture, Christian teachings, traditions/rituals that enrich our journey and give meaning to it.*

It is very clear in this psalm that the sustenance for the journey for these pilgrims comes from God himself. ***Happy are those whose strength is in you.***

And they are acutely aware that God is indeed travelling with them, protecting them, guiding them, encouraging them on their way.

The festivals that they were going to celebrate were the annual rituals that reminded them of God's provision through harvest, God's protection through difficult times, God's deliverance from slavery and God's on-going care for them. This is what sustained them on the journey – the stories of the journey of the whole community so far.

The fourth element is: *Recognition of the terrain that they will pass through: where we live our daily lives, the circumstances that we encounter, the landscapes that we pass through.*

Like all long journeys, pilgrims are bound to encounter some pleasant parts but also some difficult and demanding parts of the way. There would be times of fun and celebration, but also times of loss, uncertainty and even fear.

The psalmist talks of walking through the valley of Baca – and this is usually seen as referring to a place that is dry, desolate and lonely. This is when the journey is difficult, where each step is a struggle and no matter how much company we have we still have to take each step by ourselves. But the experience of those who have made this journey before is that as they pass through this dry and barren place, they find springs and pools of rainwater that provides for them what they so desperately need. And so it is when we go through dry and difficult times – we will often find previously unknown sources of strength and sustenance that gives us the ability to carry on and take the next step.

The fifth element is: *A vision for our arrival: what keeps us on the road, what draws us on, what do we want to happen when we reach our destination?*

For these people in our psalm they certainly have a vision of what awaits them when they arrive, they are desperately desiring to be in the presence of God in the house of God, they are looking forward to joy, fulfilment, satisfaction, a place of rest, safety and protection – a welcome and a home. It is this that keeps them travelling – for they know that no matter how unimportant they are, that there is a room for them in God's house – even as there is for the smallest of birds.

What keeps you on the journey? Maybe we have stopped on our journey, we have lost our vision of what it was that drew us on the journey in the first place, or we feel that that vision is no longer adequate to keep us on the move. Maybe we need to have our vision of what is ahead of us refreshed and renewed so that we will find the strength to continue.

The sixth element is: *The promise of God that we will reach our destination: what is our view of the future, where do heaven and earth meet for us?*

These travellers know that others have reached this destination, maybe they have also been before, so they know that the journey does have an end, it is not interminable, there is an arrival. Their faith is based on the fact that it is God's desire that they come to his house, and also that it is their desire is to be in God's house and so when these two things coincide, then what is desired will surely come to pass.

It is God who has instructed them and invited them to come into his presence and so it is God who will in some sense travel with them until they meet.

***For the Lord God is a sun and shield,***

***He bestows favour and honour***

***No good thing does the Lord withhold***

***From those who walk uprightly.***

Or as the message translation puts it:

***All sunshine and sovereign is God***

***Generous in gifts and glory***

***He doesn't scrimp with his travelling companions.***

So there we have it – the six elements of pilgrimage that we can see in this psalm and that we can use as our guide in our lifelong pilgrimage which will take us into the presence of God.

I'd just like to add a couple of observations that I noted as I read this psalm.

First point of interest is

NRSV: ***As they go through the valley of Baca***

***They make it a place of springs.***

MESS: ***They wind through lonesome valleys, come upon brooks, discover cool springs and pools brimming with rain.***

It is in the midst of barrenness and dryness that these travellers discover sources of refreshment. Many spiritual writers have noted that the Biblical story begins in a garden and ends in a city, and that the journey goes through the wilderness or desert – a place of dryness. This, they say, is to be accepted and expected, it shouldn't take us by surprise. But the assurance they give is that it is in *these* places that we will be transformed the most. This is when we will discover more about ourselves and about others and about God. This is when we dig deeper to find the resources that God has for us, and we find things that we would never find in times of peace and rest.

Second point of interest:

**NRSV: *They go from strength to strength,***

***The God of Gods will be seen in Zion.***

**MESS: *God-travelled, these roads curve up the mountain and at the last turn – Zion! God in full view!***

When we first set out on this journey and we look ahead we may feel that we haven't the strength to complete it – but actually what happens is that as we travel our strength increases.

On Friday I was talking with someone who had completed the Land's End to John O'Groats cycle ride. They had planned out the route with a certain number of miles each day and booked their accommodation ahead of time. But what they found was that by the time they got to Scotland they were finishing their daily mileage by lunch time. They had become fitter and stronger as the days had gone by almost without noticing it. And so it seems to be in pilgrimage – even though the roads curve up the mountain and the path may be steep, the pilgrim gains strength as the journey goes on.

Third point of interest:

**NRSV: *in whose heart are the highways to Zion.***

**MESS: *whose lives become roads you travel.***

A pilgrimage is not just a long distance walk that we do for the physical exercise or for the sense of achievement, or to fulfil a goal.

A pilgrimage is a journey of transformation, where what we encounter, both in the outer world and the inner world, changes us. A pilgrimage is a journey of the heart. We may think that the path in front of us is the road we are travelling, but as we travel we also become aware that God is also making a pilgrimage into our lives, that the paths of our hearts are where he wishes to walk. And so

as we walk towards the destination of God's presence, so we also find God's presence becoming real within us. And we do then find that heaven is in our heart for God is dwelling there.

In our second reading today we heard from Paul, who was nearing his journey's end – he used the different metaphor of a race, but it is the same sense of arrival that we hear in his words.

He has run the full distance, he has faced abandonment by friends, but he says, the Lord stayed with me and gave me strength. He found himself in difficult and dangerous situations but each time was rescued from harm and he expects to be taken safely into God's heavenly kingdom, and not only him, but all those who have travelled as he has. Paul the pilgrim is in sight of his destination – and he has found as the old pilgrims before him that God has been his strength and brought him safely to the end of his journey.

Imagine for a moment that you are walking in the company of these pilgrims of old, travelling to the temple to meet with God, to be in his presence. Imagine the depth of their desire, the strength of their conviction, the encouragement of their company, the melodies of their singing – Can you hear them?