

Sunday 23 July

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

Good evening, everyone, and can I say how delighted I am to be here, speaking to you in this special service at the end of your inaugural deanery pilgrimage. I confess I feel something of a fraud, as I have sadly not actually walked any of the route with you. On this occasion, that is. Some of you will know that I lived in this Deanery until 2012, when my husband Ben was Vicar of Bodicote. We're both keen walkers – in fact, my excuse for not joining the pilgrimage this week is that I was until last night on a walking holiday in France. But in the sixteen years we lived in north Oxfordshire we spent many days off walking the footpaths and visiting the churches and villages of this beautiful area. And I think this initiative to create a deanery pilgrimage is a brilliant one.

When Hugh kindly asked me – some time last year, I think – if I would speak on this occasion I confess I did wonder what I could possibly say that would be appropriate to the occasion. Actually, if I'm honest, when I first read his email – and I was rushing at the time – I thought he was asking me to *suggest* a speaker, and immediately put forward the name of a friend of mine who has an academic interest in the subject of pilgrimage and has written a number of books on the theme. But no: to my horror, Hugh was generously – foolishly, perhaps – asking *me*. (Any complaints about that to him, please, not me.)

The reason, I think, that he thought this might be a good idea is that I've thought quite a lot about pilgrimage. In fact, I've written a book about it. I should stress, it's not a 'how to' guide or an academic study. No, it's a novel, called *Knowing Anna*. And I hope you'll forgive me if I tell you a bit about it. (Bear with me; this really isn't a plug. Though of course if you do want to buy it, copies are available...)

My novel is about a woman called Anna, who is 42 when she dies. Anna leaves a husband and two children; she has parents, friends and colleagues. They are all "walking through the valley of the shadow of death", as the Psalmist so poignantly expresses it in Psalm 23 v.4. They have no sense of walking in

“green pastures” or by “still waters” (v.2). Just the horrible agony of bereavement.

Before Anna’s death, she asks her parish priest, Fr Stephen, to lead a pilgrimage in her memory a few months later. She makes this request because she herself walked part of the *Camino*, the famous route to Santiago de Compostela, at a particular crossroads in her life.

The story sees Anna’s family and friends set out on the 100 or so mile Pilgrims’ Way from Guildford to Canterbury. The journey takes nine days. The pilgrims spend a part of each day in silence, guided by Father Stephen, who offers reflections, signposts really, to help them navigate their walk through “the valley of the shadow of death”. Through this, the reader learns about Anna and her life, and her relationships with her nearest and dearest. The characters begin to come to terms with their loss. Of course they don’t “get over it”; grief isn’t like that. There’s no quick fix. But they take a few small steps forward, towards “goodness and mercy” (v.6). Maybe they can even say that God “restores their souls” (v.3).

So why did I choose to set the novel on a pilgrimage? I think there are three interrelated reasons, all of which, I think, say something about the deep value of pilgrimage and why it still matters today.

Reason number one: there’s nothing new under the sun. I’m not the first person to see that pilgrimage offers great potential for storytelling. Think of Chaucer, think of Bunyan, think of Rachel Joyce and *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*. Some of you will have seen the Martin Sheen film, *The Way*, which came out in 2010. There are others. In fact, there is quite a well-known literary theory that there *are* only seven basic plots in fiction, and one of these is ‘the quest’. You could say that my characters are on a *quest* for Canterbury, a quest for understanding, a quest for coming to terms with to their new life without Anna. For some, but by no means all of the characters, it’s also a quest for God. So pilgrimage can be a means of **finding meaning**.

Reason number two: pilgrimage is really popular at the moment. I myself have been on a number of pilgrimages. I’ve been to the Holy Land several times, three times helping Bishop John, our previous Bishop of Oxford, taking groups from this diocese. On behalf of Bishop John, I also helped set up the

Thames Pilgrim Way, which we inaugurated as part of his farewell to the diocese in September 2014. Two hundred people came on that. Not all at once, I'm glad to say, and not everyone walked the whole 104 miles. (Don't tell anyone, but even the bishop didn't manage that; he did part of the journey by boat, but to be fair, he had just had a procedure to fix his heart.)

If you're in any doubt about the appeal, let me share with you some figures from Santiago de Compostela, which seems to be the über-pilgrimage of our times. The Society of St James records that in 2015, 262,000 pilgrims arrived in Santiago and claimed their 'compostela', the certificate of completion which you are entitled to if you travel the last 100 km by foot or on horseback. Ten years earlier, in 2005, that figure was just 93,000. Ten years before that, it was 19,000. And in 1985, just 690. That's an extraordinary exponential surge in interest.

Interestingly, as well as counting them, the Society of St James also asks people to fill in a survey on their reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage. Do you know, although they nearly always describe themselves *as* "pilgrims", only a small number of these travellers say that their reasons faith related. So in 2013, for example, only 21.5% ticked "spiritual or religious" as their reason for undertaking the pilgrimage.

Others were motivated by the physical challenge, or adventure, or by the chance to spend time with friends and family. Many were marking a particular birthday or major life event. Some were more interested in the scenery. But isn't that fascinating? It seems there's some really elemental "pull" about pilgrimage. And to me, those figures show that pilgrimage is wonderfully inclusive. People can – and do – participate at many different levels, irrespective of where they might be on their faith journey.

And that leads me to **reason number three**. I think part of the universal appeal of pilgrimage – and at the same time, one reason why it offers such fertile territory for the storyteller – is that if you set out in the right spirit, a **pilgrimage can be rich in encounter**. Encounter with God, encounter with other people, with history, with landscape. Encounter with yourself.

I had a look at the 'about' section on your Deddington Deanery Pilgrimage website. From what I remember, it says that the route is rich in history, for

example its associations with the Civil War. It says there's architectural merit in the churches, but they are first and foremost places where the spirit can be nourished in quiet meditation and prayer. It says you'll find peace and tranquillity, as well as the noise of the M40 and the bustle of 21st century life. And that there are rewards aplenty to be found in local pubs and B&Bs.

And that's exactly it, isn't it? Pilgrimage can feed body, mind and spirit, if we let it. If we set out on the road in a pilgrim spirit, God nurtures us and blesses us, often in ways we least expect.

Some of that is about stripping things down to the bare essentials. It's about you and the road. It's about you and God. Like that bit in the Gospels, where Jesus sends out his apostles, and tells them to take nothing for their journey – no staff, no bag, no bread and no money, but to live in faith. That's quite a tall order, isn't it?

Some of it's about taking a break from the busy-ness of 21st century life. It's about deliberately releasing ourselves from our everyday concerns and routines; about turning away from earthly concerns to more spiritual ones. Maybe it's that frantic pace that has propelled so many people onto the *Camino* – which is sometimes so busy nowadays that I'm told it can actually be quite hard to find much solitude.

Mind you, pilgrimage is not just about solitude. It's also about the people you meet along the way and the stories you share. I've had some fascinating, memorable conversations on pilgrimage. All sorts of things come out when you're walking side by side. It's a bit like doing the washing up or going on a car journey with a tricky teenager: confidences are often easier to share when there's no eye contact. As I tried to show in my novel, a pilgrimage offers the chance to get alongside others both physically *and* metaphorically.

It's about pausing and praying in places where you know prayers have been said, century after century. It's about visiting those precious places where the boundary between heaven and earth is especially thin, and allowing God to break through. It's about considering our history, our landscape and our place within it. Remembering those who have gone before, and those who will follow us.

And ultimately it's about reflecting on our own path, our walk with God. A pilgrimage is a metaphor for our own life's journey. In the passage from Deuteronomy we heard, Moses reflects on the Lord's commands. "You've been skirting this hill country long enough," God tells him. "Head north." God warns Moses that there will be trouble ahead: the people they meet will be afraid. They should trade with them, but not engage in battle. I don't know about you, but I don't always get quite such clear instructions from God. On the other hand, I often find a walk clears my head. A pilgrimage all the more so.

And at the end of that passage comes the reminder that even when life is tough – and let's face it, it frequently is – we're not alone. As Moses reminds his people, "He has watched over your journey through this vast wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything."

If we're called to be pilgrim people, people of 'the way', we have to step out. Risk the rigours of the road. And with that in mind, I'd like to end with a favourite pilgrim prayer, from *Pocket Prayers for Pilgrims*.

Set out!
 You were born for the road.
 You have a meeting to keep.
 Where? With whom?
 Perhaps with yourself.

Set out!
 Alone or with others –
 But get out of yourself.
 You have created rivals;
 You will find companions.
 You envisaged enemies;
 You will find brothers and sisters.

Set out!
 Your head does not know
 Where your feet
 Are leading your heart.

Set out!
 You were born for the road –
 The pilgrim's road.
 Someone is coming to meet you,
 Is seeking you
 In the shrine at the end of the road,
 In the shrine at the depths of your heart.

Go! God already walks with you.'

Amen