

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 20th November 2022
Isaiah 2: 1 - 5
Psalm 122
Luke 2: 41 - 49
'Pilgrimage'

Good morning to everyone, again. **Let's Pray**

Following Helene's very interesting report on her pilgrimage along the Chemin de Saint Jacques, so far, and the lovely pictures, it seems a good idea to explore what 'Pilgrimage' could mean for all of us.

Pilgrim's first started walking to the Shrine of St James - the Camino de Santiago, or the Chemin de St Jacques, around the year 800 AD; often as a penance, seeking and praying for forgiveness; and in those days, the journey from many different parts of Europe could take many months, often more than a year.

Now it's clear, we do not all have the time, or the luxury, of taking a couple of months or even a couple of weeks out of our lives to go on that kind of spiritual excursion.

Or, maybe, the idea of a very long walk, hoping to find a safer place, brings back memories too painful for some of you.

My dictionary describes a pilgrimage as 'A journey to a sacred space or shrine'; also 'any journey - especially a long one, undertaken as a quest or act of devotion', or 'a long search, made for exalted or sentimental reasons'.

Friedrich Nietzsche, a famous philosopher, described the idea of pilgrimage as 'A Long Obedience in the same Direction'.

Certainly, as I walked the Camino de Santiago myself, some years ago and again, as I was working with Pilgrims who were arriving in Santiago just a few weeks ago, I began to understand that people set out on pilgrimages for many different reasons.

Pilgrims are usually hoping, or looking for something but have no idea exactly what they are seeking. Often they're looking for closure and a fresh way forward; for peace, for hope or perhaps a spiritual experience. All are looking for something quite personal and individual. Many tell me they just needed time out to think, or to reflect on a life changing incident. Some walk in memory of a loved one who has died.

Many pilgrims I've met are looking for a new beginning in life, and often they start exploring the possibility of a new beginning in faith, learning to walk with God.

Pilgrimages are definitely not a new idea. As we heard in our reading from Isaiah 2: 1 - 5 - possibly written 700 years or more before Jesus' ministry on earth, (that's around 3,000 years ago) Isaiah prophesied that all the nations will stream (or river) towards the Mountain of God's House; they'll say 'Come let's climb God's Mountain, go to the House of the God of Jacob ... He'll show us the way He works so we can live the way we're made.' That's an interesting explanation, that we are all created specifically to worship God, and most of us need to learn how to do it!

Today's Psalm (122) is one of the Psalms of Ascent - Psalms the pilgrims sang as they climbed up to the Temple in Jerusalem.

From very early in the history of the Jewish people, they were familiar with the idea of pilgrimage, and every year thousands and thousands of Jewish people made Pilgrimages to the Temple, in Jerusalem to worship God, especially around the time of the Passover, when they remembered and acknowledged how God helped them to escape from slavery in Egypt; which was, itself, the beginning of a forty year pilgrimage, towards the land God had promised to give them.

Remarkably, there was absolutely no geographical need for that journey to take anything like 40 years; they probably could have made the journey in a few weeks; but God used this extended journey as a time of formation, education, repentance and preparation for the 'Children of Israel'; teaching them how to obey and trust Him.

So it is highly appropriate to be talking about 'Pilgrimage' just before the start of Advent (Advent Sunday is next week), because Advent is a time in the Church year of repentance and preparation for us, as we get ready to celebrate the birth of our Saviour, Jesus, at Christmas.

The Gospel reading, from Luke, reminds us that, as a teenager, Jesus himself went up from Nazareth to the Temple in Jerusalem, with his parents, to celebrate the Passover in the Temple (God's House). They will have undertaken this pilgrimage, along with hundreds of others from their area, every year they were able to do so.

Also, towards the end of His ministry on earth, we read of Jesus making an intentional journey, or Pilgrimage, towards Jerusalem - where He knew he was going to die. In Luke 19: 28ff we read of Jesus approaching Jerusalem with crowds of followers, or disciples, and how He celebrated his arrival with a 'Triumphal Entry'

riding on the back of a young donkey - which you could describe as an arrival in 'triumphant humility'.

The purpose of that amazing 'pilgrimage' was, simply, for the Redemption of the World sacrificing His life for us, to break down the barrier of sin between us and God.

As I was writing this, Jesus' words to Thomas (John 14.6) sprang into my mind: 'I am the way, and the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me.'

Those words alone are enough to make me want to join Jesus' Pilgrimage, seeking to discover The Way, and the Truth and The Life; so that, in the fullness of time, I will be granted the amazing privilege of coming face to face with our Father God.

But, as I said right at the beginning; it is not possible for everyone to take a chunk of time out of their life to go on a long distance Pilgrimage - even if they have the financial resources.

But it is quite feasible to treat our daily lives as a Pilgrimage, a Holy Journey - learning to follow and trust Jesus. Learning by reading from His Word - the Bible - every day, and conversing with Him, in prayer, as we journey with Him.

As I think Helene explained, every Pilgrimage has wonderful times, and some really difficult times, which you'd rather forget. Good times and bad times are perfectly normal in our lives; we just have to lift both good and bad times to God.

Pilgrimages often have times of great fellowship, many people make lifelong friends along the way. That is also exactly what the Church is about - learning to follow Jesus, The Way and the Truth and the Life, in fellowship with each other.

Whether you want to travel long distances on foot; or whether you simply want to follow Jesus more closely in your daily life - the ingredients are very similar (apart from the blisters!)

Make time to be alone with God, read His Word, spend time in prayer, listening to and hearing from our Saviour Jesus; and you can do that every day - starting today!

Bon Camino ... Let's Pray ...