

# What is Pilgrimage?



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Pilgrimage today can mean many different things. It is not only understood in a religious context; Beatles fans might regard a visit to Abbey Road as a pilgrimage. All major religions practice pilgrimage; thousands of Hindu pilgrims bathe each year in the river Ganges; Muslims seek to make the sacred journey to Mecca. Pilgrimage plays a part in some Christian denominations too; for example pilgrimages to the Roman Catholic shrine at Lourdes where many have encountered healing, or to Canterbury, with its significance in the history of the Church of England. As we look forward to our CEB pilgrimages in October, we are exploring what these experiences may mean for us.

Pilgrimage doesn't have to involve travel, it can be an inner journey too, a journey of the heart, soul and mind.

Pilgrimage is generally understood to involve a physical journey, such as the famous Camino de Santiago Compostela a network of paths across Europe leading to the burial place of St. James in Spain which is travelled by around 350,000 people every year. But pilgrimage doesn't have to involve travel it can be an inner journey too, a journey of the heart, soul and mind. Although the word pilgrimage is never mentioned in the Bible, it is clear that throughout the history of the Jewish and Christian traditions, there has been a sense of journey, from the long wilderness wanderings to find the Promised Land in Exodus, through the journey Jesus made to Jerusalem, recounted by the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, to the missionary journeys of St Paul, described in the Acts of the Apostles. All these people (and many others) learned about God on the way and pilgrims today are also offered this invitation.

It can be helpful to think about pilgrimage in four stages; departure, the pilgrim path, the sacred centre and the return. Let's look at each one.

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## Departure

One simple definition of Christian pilgrimage is an intentional journey in response to the stirring of the Spirit. A pilgrimage might be undertaken because of restlessness, a realisation that life has more to offer, a desire to go deeper into oneself or into God. Sometimes people decide to go on pilgrimage in memory of a friend or family member who has died, or in thanksgiving for recovery from illness. Perhaps it is just a sense of needing to discover God in a new way. Being outside in the fresh air whatever the weather, can sometimes feel a more attractive way of communing with God than sitting in a church pew!

Departure necessitates preparation. Someone planning to walk or travel to a particular destination will need to plan the journey, think about what needs to be taken. It is important to carry minimal luggage; a pilgrim travels light. Even if a physical journey is not involved, considering our priorities in life, what is important to us and what might be weighing us down is a helpful exercise. Bearing a grudge, carrying self-pity or wanting to go back to how things were before can all be heavy loads to carry in life. Setting off on a pilgrimage is a good opportunity to set such things down, to leave them behind intentionally and to find a new freedom in doing so. These might be symbolised by the stones we took from the last liturgy at Damascus in July.

The pilgrim will need to draw deeply on inner resources

Reflect: Do I feel a sense of restlessness? How might I prepare for a pilgrimage, whether physical or inward?

## The Pilgrim Path

So the journey begins, with all its opportunities and challenges. On a physical walk there may be blisters, or bad weather, or barbed wire fences, or total disorientation. All these things have their parallels in everyday life. The pilgrim will need to draw deeply on inner resources; attentiveness to the road will bring new delights (and help the pilgrim not to get lost); courage will encourage the pilgrim to keep going even when they feel like giving up. At times we will tire just as we do in the journey of life. We may become discouraged and think about giving up. Two basic rhythms can sustain us and help us to keep going; Breathe

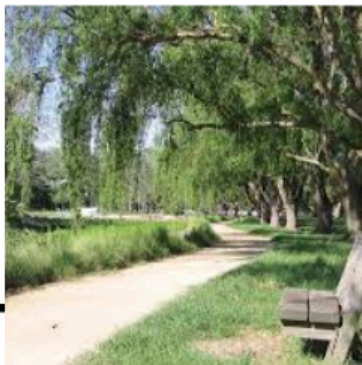


in, breathe out is the first - it's so fundamental we don't usually give it any thought, until we find ourselves struggling for breath, perhaps. Focusing on our breathing might calm our fears and keep us moving. The other rhythm is Left foot, right foot left foot right foot, seeing the overall journey not as something overwhelming and unattainable but as a series of small steps. All we can do in moments of panic or challenge or anxiety is to take the next step and we will get through.

A sense of liminality is another important aspect of pilgrimage this is the realisation that much of life is lived in a state of transition, in a space in between. This might feel unsettling at times, but if we can learn to embrace that sense of uncertainty it can be liberating as we learn not to rely too much on life staying the same, we may be more open to the work of God's Spirit in leading us into a deeper experience of God.

The intentional journey gives us space to encounter ourselves in a different way.

The pilgrim path will be a place of encounter, and this too can be transformative. The intentional journey gives us space to encounter ourselves in a different way; to spend time reflecting on our own journey of life, on the ways in which we have experienced God, on the things which motivate us or demotivate us. Then, whether walking on a wet track along The Yarrowee River or treading the dusty road to Santiago in scorching sun in Spain, there will be encounters with others on the road. From these we learn different things perhaps someone we meet helps us identify birdsong, or tells us about the history of the place, or perhaps pours out their own story as we walk alongside each other for a time. Walking side by side with a stranger can make telling our story easier than sitting face to face with someone we know. Even if one is alone much of the time, pilgrimage connects us with those who have gone before we may find ourselves thinking about family members and friends who have died, or going further back in time and thinking about some of the saints of previous centuries whose lives changed the spiritual landscape of their lands. Their struggles and successes, their life of learning



more about God at work can inspire our pilgrimage today.

Reflect: How might focusing on attentiveness, courage, rhythm or liminality help me on my journey of life at the moment?

## **The Sacred Centre**

It may be a sense that we are in a thin place where the boundary between earth and heaven is hardly discernible.

As well as encountering ourselves and encountering others, in pilgrimage there is an expectation that somewhere along the way there will be an encounter with the divine, the other, something outside ourselves. Perhaps this is the factor which most distinguishes a pilgrimage from any other walk. Moses (in Exodus chapter 3 in the Bible) encountered God in a bush which seemed to be on fire but wasn't burned up. Not all encounters with God are that dramatic, it may be a sense that we are in a thin place where the boundary between earth and heaven is hardly discernible and somehow, in wild beauty or urban landscape or the quiet of a church or our own bedroom, God seems to be drawing close to us. It's impossible to predict where or when this encounter might occur and it may happen more than once. When it does, when tears come or the heart beats faster, or we feel a sense of peace or well-being, it's time to put down the camera and the guidebook and open ourselves up to this revelation of the presence of God. A sacred site, such as the traditional birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem might be crowded with tourists, and yet might still move us to tears or it might not! God's Spirit blows where she will and might elude us in the expected places, whilst turning up in a situation which seemed very ordinary. That's part of the wonder and blessing of pilgrimage.

Reflect: Where in my journey have I encountered the presence of God? How might I focus more on this?



## The Return

At some point the pilgrimage will end or will it? There is a sense that the end of every journey is the beginning of the next, so we may feel that all of life is an ongoing pilgrimage. But there are times to rest and reflect on what has been happening in our lives. The pilgrim experiences some kind of transformation as they journey so perhaps we take the opportunity to pause and ask how we have changed in the past week, month, year. Sometimes we don't notice the changes which take place in ourselves we may need to talk to a trusted friend to identify the ways in which God has been gently shaping and changing us, ready for whatever lies ahead.

Reflect: Have I known transformation in my life recently? Are there ways in which I would like to be transformed? What journey might be coming next for me?

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