

The Feast of Saint James the Greater, 2007  
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR  
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

The words we just sang are from *Pilgrim's Progress* (or more completely *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which is to Come; Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream*) John Bunyan's extraordinary book about Christian living. You may or may not have read it, perhaps in high school English. It is the most famous allegory in the English language and the most translated English book ever. (The Bible has been translated more, but of course is not originally in English.)

In the last Parish the Thought, I asked people to be thinking in preparation for today's celebration, to be thinking about what the Feast of Saint James might have to say to us in our lives today. In particular I suggested thinking about ourselves as Sons of Thunder like James and his brother John, or about ourselves as Pilgrims.

I am focusing on the pilgrim idea. Bunyan's whole book is about a pilgrim, representing every faithful Christian. But that book was written three and a half centuries ago.

What about us? What about now? What does it mean for us to live as pilgrims?

We all know that pilgrimages to Compostela (the resting place of our patron saint), to Canterbury, to Jerusalem, to Iona, to a wide array of Holy Places, were an important part of medieval life. But they have never stopped being important. And in the last forty years are becoming increasingly important again. Why do people go to any of these holy places? Some go as tourists, to look at the pilgrims, to watch what they do, to see the beautiful Cathedrals and other sights, to try to catch a glimpse of something ancient and strange. Some go as wanderers, never rooted, always touching down to gather a new experience into their backpacks. What does it mean to go as a pilgrim? Pilgrims go to particular places in search of holiness and insight, in search of connection to God. Holy places are called 'thin places' in the Celtic tradition, that is places where there is less division between the physical world and the spiritual world, where it is easier to hear the voice of God, to feel one's proper place in the cosmos.

Some pilgrims used to be sent by their spiritual directors as a way to make good their repentance for particular grievous sins. Today people are more often called than sent. God invites us on an adventure, to a closer walk.

So how does a pilgrim go? To go as a pilgrim means to take no extraneous stuff. It means to have direction, a destination. It means to go with great hope, because God is waiting for us. Going on pilgrimage also means not being stuck in one place, one set of circumstances. There is a way out, a way forward. Being on pilgrimage means having companions on the way, because there is a community among pilgrims. We all share the same call from God, the same determination, the same destination. So being on pilgrimage engenders a great sense of support and community.

So if we see our whole lives as a pilgrimage, we live them with great intention. To quote that wonderful prayer from the Holy Isle of Lindisfarne, "Though the sun rise cheerless on this isle today I walk in a path of light. I know my greatness. I can't for a moment fall out of the everlasting arms. I'm in the heart of God and I'm on my way to glory."

Bunyan's Pilgrim (called Christian) is on his way to the Wicket Gate, which he must pass through to reach the Celestial City, his heavenly home. We may speak in terms of the Kingdom of God, or of Heaven, or of Everlasting Peace, or of the Heavenly Banquet. We have a vast array of images, but they all speak of God's love and welcome and acceptance drawing us forward. They speak of hope and promise of glory.

*Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory, in a very literal, explicit form, which can seem a bit obvious and primitive to 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. There is humor in watching our hero – called Christian – meet various companions called Pliable, Hopeful, and Obstinate, or having adventures in such places as the Valley of Humiliation or the Hill of Difficulty. Some of the place names from Bunyan's tale have entered our vocabulary, such as Vanity Fair and my lifelong favorite the Slough of Despond.

Bunyan presents this as a dream he had, during his twelve long years of imprisonment for daring to preach without a license, and not according to officially approved forms. (He was a Baptist in 17<sup>th</sup> century England.) Bunyan's earlier life had included serious struggles with faith and understanding. He

spent significant time personally in the Slough of Despond, worrying that he might be permanently lost, beyond the reach of Christ's redemption. He found his way through to a deep and sustaining faith and was able to express that faith in vivid imaginative terms that have won the hearts of people all over the world.

Some find such imaginative, symbolic journeys to be a significant part of their pilgrimage. It can be helpful when one is really discouraged to use the image of the Slough of Despond, to visualize it as a quagmire, a swamp of discouragement, and so to look for the stone steps hidden in the mire, to look for the hand of Helpful to draw us out.

For others physical pilgrimages are important. To go to the thin places can help us find our way further on our spiritual paths. We may catch a glimpse of God, or a glimpse of ourselves as God sees us. On the way or at the place we can encounter other people of great faith and determination, people whose hearts and imaginations have been captured by God. And meeting those people, we are made stronger and wiser. Hearing the stories of past pilgrims and touching the things that they touched connects us to them and their journeys.

Pilgrim paths are all paved with prayer and if you have been to great pilgrim sites you have probably felt the thick atmosphere of prayer that builds up over the centuries. You can breathe it in and find your soul fed.

For some people the physical journey is very important. For others the imaginative journey like Bunyan's is key. Great religious leaders throughout history remind us that the true pilgrimage, the one that matters ultimately, is the internal pilgrimage, the pilgrimage, not of the body, nor of the mind, but of the heart and soul to God.

There are wise and holy people who have discouraged the faithful from placing importance on physical pilgrimages, and thus focusing on external realities instead of spiritual ones. And those wise and holy people may well be able to accomplish great spiritual growth without the aid of any physical journey, any allegory, any stories or other imaginative journey. But that does not make them right or better. The goal is always the same: that we live our lives intentionally, on a path toward God, toward the person God created each of us to be, toward the heart of community with the rest of the people of God.

And God created us all different. For some of us, going on physical journeys, intentional pilgrimages to holy places, is an important part of that inner pilgrimage to God. For some of us, reading and hearing tales of holy people finding their way to God is an important part.

For some of us, like John Bunyan, using our own imaginations to explore the Christian life and create our own tales is important.

The scallop shells that are traditionally symbols of pilgrims, and that we wear as name tags, have myriad lines and ridges all converging, which are seen to represent the many paths to God coming to the same point.

We in this community are a pilgrim band. For some of us Cursillo is a critical part of our pilgrimage, for other certain prayer disciplines, for others physical pilgrimages, for others walking the labyrinth, for others service to the poor, for others visiting the sick. Our paths vary. But we are bound together by our common call to a common destination. We are fortunate to be traveling together and today is our day to rejoice in that.

Our companionship is important. Share your experiences of God, your adventures on your pilgrim path. The Irish talk about having an *anam cara*, a soul friend, someone who shares our journey, someone with whom we can pray and laugh and cry, someone to share ideas and experiences of God, someone to hold our hand as we go. So look in your pew and look in your heart and see if perhaps God has granted you a soul friend in our pilgrim band – and wear your red shoes, ring your bells, rejoice – because we are on our way to glory!

And now in the words of an Irish pilgrim prayer:

May the Christ who walks with wounded feet, walk with us all on the road.

May the Christ who serves with wounded hands, stretch out our hands to serve.

May the Christ who loves with the wounded heart, open our hearts to love. Amen.

