

## Pilgrimage to the Promised Land

During Lent I want to talk a bit about Pilgrimage, pilgrimage to different places - to Canterbury, Agen and to Rome. But today I'm starting with the Old Testament, with the idea of Pilgrimage to the Promised Land.

So a quick resumé from the Old Testament. The first chapters are all about 'the beginning', creation and how humanity might have come to know the difference between good and evil with great stories like Adam and Eve and Noah's Ark. But then comes a connected story which begins with Abraham, his son Isaac and his son Jacob – and then the story of Jacob's 12 sons. There was a famine so the 12 sons went to Egypt in search of food. One of those sons, Joseph, the one with the fancy coat, ended up running the country. But after a while it all changed and his people who succeeded him in Egypt found themselves no longer as welcomed immigrants but as hated slaves. They were there, for a long time, increasing in number until a new character called Moses became the freedom fighter who helped them escape from Pharaoh's reign of terror. And so they set off across land and through sea until they found themselves in a desert. The place is better known now for the luxuries of Sharm El Sheikh, the edges of Saudia Arabia and northwards to what we know as Gaza and Israel – these were the desert areas to which they escaped.

They were running away from slavery and Moses took them into a rocky desert for 40 years as they journeyed round looking for somewhere to settle and live, somewhere they called the Promised Land. They became a nomadic people but they wanted more - they were looking for somewhere to live, somewhere they could be comfortable, somewhere where they could build proper houses to live in instead of tents, somewhere where they could farm and develop land instead of only looking after animals that they could herd from one place to another, somewhere they might call home. Moses gave them rules to live by and a faith to follow but their goal was to arrive one day in a place where they could settle. They wouldn't have understood their journey as a pilgrimage - but that's what it was. They weren't just travelling from A to B (from alpha to beta), they were travelling from A to Z (from alpha to omega), to the place that would not only be their physical home, but which would also be their spiritual home, the home they believed they'd been promised, not just by Moses but by God. And so it was the place they called the Promised Land – the place they looked forward to. They searched for a place not just to live, but to a place where they could find themselves.

Lent marks the journey that Jesus took, also in the desert. Not of 40 years but 40 days. His wilderness was the preamble to his own journey to the Promised Land. He wasn't looking for a physical home - but he was looking for the person within himself that could define what God's promise was for that moment.

Moses didn't make it into the Promised Land, he died before they got there. It was the people who arrived, and then a new line of leaders made their mark. And once they'd settled, they not only built houses and temples but systems of government. They introduced Kings and built up an army. Sometimes they went to war with other nations and sometimes they just had war within themselves. They developed their own culture, their own practices of religion and their own songs – the songs we now call psalms, psalms which helped them to reflect on their story, their pilgrimage and their place in the world with each other and with God.

But it's the notion of **promise** that's all important. It is about human expectation and it's about God's grace, the God who gives abundantly. The God who having said he will, does what he promised. And that's quite amazing – they wandered around for 40 years, just think of that length of time, and God kept his promise.

In their 40 years the people of Israel went round in circles a fair bit. The desert was big, but not that big, and as they travelled, one of the things they did was to sing and it just may have been that 3000 – 4000 years ago they sang basic forms of what we now know as the psalms. It may just be that some of the phrases we say in English, they once sang in Hebrew. As the gstruggled, wondering whether or not they would ever arrive, the sentiments they expressed and sang then we still express today.

I wonder how much of what we now call Psalm 52 they would have sung. And why not? Because this song, Psalm 52, is a song about trust. It is a song which recognises just how miserable and rotten human life can sometimes be, but it also a song that says we should trust in the ultimate goodness of God, the God who keeps his promise. God's promise is always to be there but, for the people who sang it, it was also a song in which they could promise to follow and to trust God. It's a two way thing – God's promise matched by the promise we make to follow and to be faithful in our own pilgrimage. At the end of our Lenten journey we trust that God will remind us of the experience of Easter – the promise of life after death. The season of Lent gives us time, time to go round and round in circles on our own journey and pilgrimage, to explore the nature of our trust in God, and our trust in the promises of God.

On Easter morning the first task of the church in the Easter liturgy is to light a new Easter candle reminding ourselves of what the book of Revelation says of Jesus, that 'he is the alpha and the omega', the beginning and the end. God is there at the beginning and God is there till the end – no matter how long, how arduous, how difficult that journey, that pilgrimage is.

The people who made that journey from Egypt to the Promised Land via 40 years in the desert would have learnt a great deal about themselves and about God. They'd known what it was to be cold and hungry, thirsty and almost on the verge of giving up but then realized that God was still there and that though they'd come close to giving up on him, he'd never given up on them. Our journey has its moments too and often it's just as arduous and it's about making tough decisions and choices about the things we say 'yes' to and the things we say 'no' to.

The desert or the wilderness is not just the physically harsh landscape of north Africa and the Middle East. It's as much a spiritual place as it is physical. It is the place in our own journey where, if we allow it, we can dry out and lose the energy to keep going. Lent gives us the time to stop and re-assess our own pilgrimage to the Promised Land, to comprehend the people we are, to be honest about the things we get wrong and to know by the abundant grace of God, God's keeps his promise to us all.

Let us pray ...

God of our earthly pilgrimage,  
Feed your Easter people with the bread of heaven  
That we may hunger and thirst for all that which is good  
Until we reach our promised land,  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.