

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
7th March, 2015, at St George's Church, Borough High Street, London, SE1 1JA

PRESENTATION ON PILGRIMAGE

by

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The subject of Pilgrimage is very close to my heart. Holy Brigitte, who is the saint of the Diocese of Linköping, taught us a special prayer;

O Lord, show us your way and make us willing to walk it.

It's a wonderful prayer, isn't it? So throughout my life all my pilgrimages have started with that prayer. I've been very much involved in the pilgrimage movement in Sweden, and in Linköping, where I was bishop, we walked every year. The groups were mainly young people from about 16 to 30 years of age, often between 200 and 300 at a time. I've even had as many as 500 walking with me.

'Give me five days of your life!' I told them, 'Go with me on a pilgrimage, and you will never forget it.' And I think that's true. If you go five or six days on a pilgrimage you will never forget it. It doesn't mean that you will have a revolutionary experience, but it is something deep in your heart.

But before I go on and share something of my long experience of pilgrimage I have to tell you that I used to be against it! I must confess that I was very much against the pilgrimage movement as a young theologian. I was brought up in a Lutheran pastor's home in Malmo in Southern Sweden, my parents were very pious, and I don't think they ever spoke about pilgrimage in my home. I was not against pilgrimage because of Martin Luther. He was against it, of course. But that was the story 500 years ago. And I think most of you will agree with me that that was a story about mistakes and misunderstandings, when pilgrimages were used for all kinds of purposes that merited Luther's criticisms. But the situation today is somewhat different.

I was a '68 Boy'. Do you remember the 68 Movement? Perhaps you're all too young! It was a political movement in Western Europe against the Vietnam War and in favour of solidarity with poor people, and I was very much part of it as a young theologian and I wrote my dissertation about National Socialism. Pilgrimage seemed to me no more than an escape. Nobody in Sweden went on pilgrimages in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. I don't even think the Roman Catholics did! But there were hymns about pilgrimage. We used to sing about it. Occasionally sermons were preached about pilgrimage, and I hated it! I thought pilgrimage was a means of escape from reality. It was about forgetting your neighbours and thinking about your own wellbeing, and your life in heaven. I considered it unchristian, and I couldn't do it. I thought the song written by Joe Hill in 1911 in criticism of the Church, 'You'll get pie in the sky when you die', summed up this pilgrimage attitude!

We also had the term *Peregrinus*. In normal use the word means a foreigner. So this view taught that you are a foreigner in this world, somehow removed from it. That wasn't something I wanted. God loves the world. He sent his own Son into this world. Now I understand that the term *Peregrinus* comes from Rome where, in the early days of the

Church, foreigners came to visit the graves of the saints. Christians in Rome asked each other, 'Who are these people?' and received the reply, 'They are *peregrini*, and they are foreigners, just visiting the grave of St Paul!' They were pilgrims. They were not escaping from this world.

I became Dean of Uppsala Cathedral, which is a national shrine in Sweden. I was invited to the European Cathedrals Association meeting in Canterbury. 25 deans from all over northern Europe were there, together with some organists. The Dean of Canterbury gave us a warm welcome. Canterbury Cathedral was a member of the 'Two-Million Club' in those days; it was one of the churches in England that had more than two million visitors every year. So there were crowds of tourists and guides speaking in many languages – and there was no silence. So we complained, of course! The Dean promised us one hour between 8 and 9 o'clock in the evening. You can have the whole cathedral for yourselves.

For that one hour we went in silence, deans and organists in that wonderful building, together in prayer and meditation. And it was then that I became a pilgrim. In the crypt of the cathedral there was a little altar where you could buy candles, and written there in huge letters it said, 'To Visitors and Pilgrims'. And I thought, 'Am I a visitor? Or am I a pilgrim?' I hadn't come to the cathedral only to be a visitor. I went to Canterbury to pray, to be a Christian in Canterbury, so I was a pilgrim. And I promised myself I would be a pilgrim the rest of my life! But never, never as an escape from this world! I will always have my neighbour in mind when walking on pilgrimages.

For me, pilgrimage is a healthy act; it promotes life, health for my body when I'm walking, and health for my soul, for my spirit. It's an holistic act, keeping body and soul together. When you walk on a pilgrimage you pray, you think, you dream, you eat and drink, and body and soul merge into each other, and you can't really make a distinction between them. And I believe that in this you see a little more of God's will. God did create human beings as a whole being with body and soul. So pilgrimage helps to bring together what so often is divided.

In my view – and you don't have to share my view – we are living in a society in western Europe today where we are tempted all the time to divide, to divide people from people, for example, and I am very much part of that myself. Working life, leisure time, family life, sports, entertainment, music and so on – people expect different things of me in the different roles I'm playing. So there's a temptation all the time to put myself into different pigeon-holes, and it is difficult to keep the whole of my life together.

We have social segregation, in the cities and the countryside, between the wealthy and the poor, between immigrants and indigenous people, the employed and the unemployed, and I have the feeling that society is continually tempting me to divide people into groups. For instance, the news we get in the daily papers and television is fragmentary in character. It may start with the crisis in Ukraine, then it jumps to Leicester and the conflict between different groups of people there, then it leaps to President Obama who says something very important, then to the Middle East and to something else in London. It's a mixture, jumping here and jumping there, and it is not held together, and it tempts me to think that my existence is an existence of divisions, of fragments here and there.

It's not so long ago that we had the *apartheid* regime in South Africa, which meant a literal segregation of people. And I told you that I studied National Socialism during the twentieth century and I have to tell you that National Socialism was another example of segregation,

between weak and strong, where you had to despise the weak. And we know that the weak were the Jews, the homosexuals, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the gypsies and so on.

This movement towards segregation is in complete contrast to the Christian faith. At the core of Christian belief is belonging. We believe in one God who has created all human beings, along with the whole of creation, earth, sea, sky – everything. So when you go on pilgrimage you are making a conscious protest against segregation. You pray to be ever more conscious of wholly belonging, and I believe that the act of walking together helps to bring you closer to this sense of belonging, and to a holistic perspective of yourself.

So, what is a pilgrimage? There will be many different opinions about that. Some say it's only a pilgrimage if you walk a certain distance each day, or if you walk for a particular number of days, or if you pray or attend a certain number of Masses. But for me, what matters is what the person engaged in the pilgrimage has in mind for him/herself. We have to learn to respect everyone's own ideas.

For that reason it is very difficult for me to distinguish between pilgrims and tourists. A person may simply be walking and suddenly the thought comes, 'This is a pilgrimage I'm on today.' And why not? And if you go from one shop to another and on the way start to think of your life and pray to God and suddenly get a new insight or some new light into your life, that may be your pilgrimage for that day. I think we should be generous towards each other and open to different possibilities for different people.

Many people in the Reformation tradition emphasise the way. They are sometimes hesitant to reflect on the goal because the old Roman Catholic tradition focused on certain goals associated with their medieval saints. In the Reformation tradition there is less focus on the saints. But for me, the way and the goal are equally important.

The way is the longer part, of course. It takes more time. But if the pilgrimage is seen as a summary of my life, the goal is the end of my life on earth, the death of the human being. For me, the pilgrimage is a walk **in** Jesus Christ. It is not simply that he is coming with me, walking at my side as we often hear in sermons. I have more of a mystical view of Christ in me, so when I am going on a pilgrimage summarising my whole life, he is in me, and so pilgrimage turns out to be for me an Easter walk.

So when I arrive at the goal, my pilgrimage has taken me to the symbol of my death. I prefer to go to a church – it's not necessary, and you can go to Waitrose if you like – but I prefer a church. It doesn't have to be a medieval church because, for me, all church buildings are symbols of the gate of heaven. So when I arrive at the church which is my goal I never go into it immediately. I follow the old tradition and walk round it three times. You may not think that necessary, but I do it because I think there is value in that old tradition.

The first circuit of the church and I'm thinking, 'I'm here! I've reached my goal!' The second circuit and I think, 'The pilgrimage is over!' The third time I go around the church I begin thinking of the church as the symbol of the end of my physical life on earth. Of course, that can be scary! Thinking of my own death is. And when I take the first step into the church I am taking the first step into my own death.

I'm usually in a group. And we sing. And when you sing outdoors it's hard to make good music because the sound just flies away. But as I enter the church we continue to sing and we hear a change in the sound and quality of the music. The song which outdoors flew away suddenly becomes a song that embraces me. I hear the song from above, from below,

and from all round me, and for me that's a sign of God's presence. So my death is immediately a passing through the gates of heaven.

For me, that has been very important. My own fear of my own death has slowly gone away because I have walked so many pilgrimages and through that experience I have practised my own death so many times that I believe, not only with my head but within my whole existence, that God will take care of me when I die. That is one effect of pilgrimages as I have experienced them.

Let me also speak about the part silence plays in pilgrimage. For me, silence is one of the most important aspects. I would recommend that, whenever anyone goes on pilgrimage, at least one hour each day should be walked in silence. Often, when a pilgrimage ends and we share our experiences people will always say that it was the hours of silence that they will never forget. What happens while you are walking in silence? It helps me to see my inner life, and often to see things I would rather not see! My memory runs a bit like a film, it provides me with a constant supply of pictures. And we are not lords of our memory, and often we get an impression during the silence that we are more than just the sum of the parts. There is something in us that is greater than ourselves. We cannot control our life completely, and memory is one part of the greatness that God has planted in us. When you are walking in silence, memory helps you see your own life and reminds you of your belonging to God.

Now, I say it again, I am only speaking from my own experience. You may have other experiences of your own. You may approach pilgrimage in other kinds of ways, and that's allowed! But generally speaking, many people experience silence as a great help.

Classically, there are four different relationships when you go on pilgrimage. First, there is the relationship with God. You will reflect on your relationship with God, who has created you, given you your life and who has connected you with all human beings. So you immediately see that you are a part of creation, and a part of God's plan. We often say, when we go on pilgrimage, 'Drink even when you're not thirsty!' You need to do that to avoid dehydration. But I would add, 'Pray, even when you don't need it!' Regular prayer is part of the pilgrimage experience. In my experience, a break every hour for prayer in small groups, just to say a pilgrim prayer together, connected us. It's a reminder that when we pray at home, in the morning or evening, perhaps, we may be completely alone, but as you pray you are connected to all the other people around the world who are praying. You can't see them, but you know they're there. Regular prayer is enormously important.

A daily Eucharist is part of a normal pilgrimage. You don't have to do it, but if you can do it it is a help for you. It can be very simple. Often we held our Eucharist in the forest in the open air. Again, in the Eucharist we are literally united with the body of Jesus Christ. We also see that he is in us, and walking with us, helping us to see our death as an Easter event. As I journey with Christ in me I can believe that when I die God will give me new life just as he gave Jesus new life.

Second, pilgrimage is about my relationship with my neighbour. When we are on pilgrimage we walk in solidarity with others, and we travel simply. I would never go in a 5-star hotel, for example, because that would not fit with my idea of pilgrimage. We eat simply, and we live in simplicity, close to the core of life. We are in solidarity with all the poor, with all the down-trodden, praying for justice and peace. It is also a walk in protest in a way, protest against the misuse of people, against the injustice of the world, the wars and the violence –

every pilgrimage is really a protest against all that. It is a walk **for** life and **against** everything that threatens our lives.

Third, pilgrimage is a walk in relationship with nature. There has been an English initiative to form a network called 'Green Pilgrimage'. It is now a global network of people who walk in pilgrimage together towards a better environment. They seek to raise consciousness of environmental issues, and the Green Pilgrimage Network invites not just Christians of all denominations but also Hindus, Muslims and Jews. The Network is open to those religious institutions willing to engage politicians and the secular authorities responsible for their villages and towns. So you can't belong to the Network if you're just a church congregation. You have to knock at the door of the municipality and ask them to join you. And that's good, because if the church and the municipality walk together something might happen.

Some people think it's a bad thing to be a pilgrim today because there are so many Hindu and Muslim pilgrims. I used to work in India and there I saw many devoted Hindu pilgrims, with many young people among them, on the streets there. It may be that India is the country where there are most pilgrims today. But it is very bad theology to say that something is not Christian because Hindus do it! Such an attitude doesn't take belief in God as creator seriously. If God has created everybody, he has also created the Hindus. And if they think that walking on pilgrimage will help to bring them closer to God, why not? Why can't God use them in that way, just as he uses us?

Fourth, we also walk in relationship with ourselves. That is the most difficult of these relationships. We travel in relationship with God, neighbour and nature, but the most difficult thing is to find your own self. So I always say to people walking with me, 'Don't have too great expectations! You may not have some very bright or strong spiritual experience on our pilgrimage. That's by no means certain. Just go, pray, enjoy the silence and be open-minded and something may happen.' But to try to learn a little more about myself is very important. Who am I? Again, that film of my life will come before my eyes, and I will see pictures I don't want to see, pictures that I've really forgotten, as well as delightful things. All these pictures will help me get new nuances on my life. Again, I will be reminded over and over again that I am greater than the sum of my parts. There is more to me than just me – something greater than I can control.

Now I think I should end my presentation and open up for discussion. But before I do so, would like to end with a little quotation from Deuteronomy. It is Moses, the old man before his death, saying to his friends that he has reached the end of his life's journey, and he tells them, 'I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. So choose life so that you may live.'