

A road to Emmaus

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AS A RECENT PROLIFERATION OF pilgrimage brochures attest, the millennium is near. Greece, Turkey, Rome, Assisi, Oberammergau, the Holy Land, Marian shrines – Christians are heading in all these directions. Airline and travel agencies are already declaring soaring numbers of ticket sales, due in part to the impending millennium, but more importantly, I suspect, to an increased interest in the Bible and early Christian origins.¹ But what does travel to any place have to teach us, and why are so many people ‘leaving home’ in this way at this time? To propose an answer to the question, this article will take Israel/Palestine as a representative destination for Christian travellers, many of whom have made this particular journey. The earliest surviving account dates back to CE 333 when an unnamed traveller left Bordeaux for Jerusalem.²

Literature is full of narrations of journeys. Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Dante – we have all learned from their quests. The Bible also records personal travels: those of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Paul, to name a few. I am particularly interested in the journey of two disciples to a village within Palestine named Emmaus. Today travellers can choose any one of three different sites, each ‘about seven miles distant from Jerusalem’, to probe the story narrated in Luke 24:13–35. One way of looking at this story is germane to my questions: if we divide Luke’s narrative into five movements, it illustrates why people travel and provides significant stages any pilgrim can identify with and learn from. These are: journeying (24:13); being blind to the Presence because of our own expectations (24:14); being called to listen, with its expansion of horizons (24:15–30); recognition (24:31–32); and the return to the place of challenge (24:33–35). Those who travel today are given the same chance to go out of themselves, to become purified, and to return home to live in a completely new way.³ For we are most ourselves when leaving the past and setting out toward new horizons. We are most ourselves when taking risks for life.⁴

Journeying

Life is a process of setting out, of moving away, or going toward something. It involves give and take, dying and rising, and balancing

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the dark and light. The two disciples in Luke's narrative illustrate this fact. Here they are moving away from the truth. They are leaving Jerusalem because, as they perceive it, with Jesus' death their hopes for salvation have been dashed. Modern pilgrims, on the other hand, move toward the light. They travel toward places like Jerusalem because they wish to be in touch with their hopes. Moreover, their journeys are both inward and outward. Outwardly, pilgrims hope to discover something that will help them to live fuller lives. Away from ordinary life, they long to experience places, cultures, events and people in a way that will break through to new levels of realization. Ultimately, their outward adventure will then be interiorized.

Philo of Alexandria describes this same experience from antiquity:

Countless multitudes from countless cities come, some over land, others over sea, from east and west and north and south at every feast. They take the temple for their port as a general haven and safe refuge from the bustle and great turmoil of life, and there they seek to find calm weather, and released from the cares whose yoke has been heavy upon them from their earliest years, to enjoy a brief breathing-space in scenes of genial cheerfulness. Thus filled with comfortable hopes they devote the leisure, as is their bounden duty, to holiness and the honouring of God. Friendships are formed between those who hitherto knew not each other, and the sacrifices and libations are the occasion of reciprocity of feeling and constitute the surest pledge that all are of one mind.⁵

Pilgrims go forth, then, to be one with God, with others, and with themselves.⁶ They visit 'sacred places' because they believe these places are locations which have experienced an irruption of the divine.⁷ Moreover, they hold that they are also sites where one can recall and thus make present in one's own life the great interventions of God on earth and within human history.⁸ Early Christians thought, for example, that since Jerusalem was the place of Jesus' death and resurrection, it was the 'centre of the earth'. This is evident in the earliest representation of the world, a sixth-century mosaic, the Madaba Map, found in a church in the Transjordan.⁹ Jerusalem is in the centre of the sketch. To visit such a place was to be put in touch with the deepest part of oneself. It was also an opportunity to receive new knowledge and to encounter God. Such a

notion is reflected on the back cover of a recent book on the Holy Land. 'Five gospels', it says, 'record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books and one you will find in the land they call holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you.'¹⁰

Blind to the Presence because of our own expectations

Luke's travellers, however, are burdened by their own expectations, which inhibit them from seeing the truth. It is the third day since Jesus' crucifixion, and they are discussing how they see the events which happened in Jerusalem. A stranger who joins them elicits their story. Christian readers recognize that during this process the disciples' perception of how things should happen prevents them from experiencing a deeper understanding.

So too, a modern traveller would be advised not to set out on pilgrimage with well-defined expectations,

but rather with an open mind and heart, to discover and obtain insight and favours which are beyond the control of any earthly authority. It is in the spirit of total openness and surrender to the wisdom and power of divine love that the fullest benefits of the pilgrimage will be obtained. The spirituality of pilgrimage, that is, the spirituality of the inner freedom that comes through distance and detachment, is fundamental for a truly successful pilgrimage.¹¹

Such caution is especially appropriate for pilgrims to Israel, for preconceptions of how things should be may rob pilgrims of the richness of their experience. Sites cannot be deified, they are merely instruments of the truth that is alleged to have occurred there. Nowhere is this truth more evident than at the Holy Sepulchre, a place many Christians consider the holiest spot on the earth. Yet it is neither a place of beauty nor of peace and, within minutes of stepping into its dim interior,

One's ears are filled with the din of competing chants, audible evidence of the diversity among the six religious communities that occupy the building. Latin Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Egyptian Copts, Ethiopians – each group suspiciously stands guard over its space and rights, jealously contesting the church's every inch and ornament.

Visible evidence of this hostility [also] leaps out at you in the hodge-podge of styles in which the different groups have adorned their space, apparently without concern for the overall effect. The

mix of traditional icons, modernist brass sculptures, and assorted mosaics is jarring . . .¹²

Pilgrims soon learn that it is the significance of the site, rather than the site itself, which is the source of inspiration. Yet the site also provides the place where pilgrims can evoke the subjects of their meditations in their imagination,¹³ a process illustrated vividly by Antonio Bartoluzzi, the Italian architect of seven of the main churches in the Holy Land.¹⁴ A member of the Third Order of the Franciscans, he meditated long and hard on each mystery of Jesus' life before attempting to capture the essence of the Christ-event in stone. Consequently, his churches draw pilgrims to probe the significance of each incident and its place in their lives rather than the significance of the place itself.

Furthermore, journeying is not merely a geographical adventure. It is a search for a deeper place.

From the dawn of culture and religious experience, the journey was understood as more than a change of location. The outward adventure was a symbol of inward search. It is not so much the treasure at the edge of the world that the hero is seeking as it is the truth of his/her own selfhood. The quest is not the search for new political territory. It is rather the desire to conquer the dark world of human freedom and the recesses of consciousness. It is the journey toward human integration and wholeness, an odyssey of the spirit.¹⁵

The first step is 'letting go'.

Called to listen, with its expansion of horizons

The disciples' companion listens to their story and responds to it (24:25–27). What he says must have touched their hearts, for when they drew near to their destination, even though the stranger appeared to be going further, they constrained him to stay with them (24:29). In a real sense, these two disciples have moved from a position of unreceptiveness, which stemmed from their insecurity and fears and which kept them from seeing, to an attitude of hospitality and openness. They are now poised for the surprise that is soon to come.

Travellers, too, have to cope with their own fears in order successfully to cross boundaries and experience the truth of their setting

out. If they give themselves wholly to the experience of the pilgrimage, it will bless them, for their awareness of its reality will be heightened. Pilgrims can open themselves to this grace by bearing certain things in mind. Firstly, they are guests in another people's country with something to be learned from the people who live there. However, this involves encountering people as they really are and not as the pilgrims might think they are. Israel, for example, is not a gigantic museum of churches or synagogues, but a land whose people, coming as they do from different religious and cultural traditions, have to face serious problems as they try to live together in peace.¹⁶ Thus, as with Luke's disciples, pilgrims are there to listen and learn from their host so that their judgements about the place and its situation may be mature and nuanced.

Secondly, pilgrims are not in control. Perhaps this is the real cost of travel, for it involves experiences of uncertainty and 'unlearning' which can be perceived as very risky. For while one part of us seeks for new horizons and discovery, another part of us wants the quiet of security, which is found in the safety of what we already know. Openness to new experience, then, brings new insight, and in turn demands that we abandon or adjust the way we see the world.

Thirdly, pilgrimage sites attract a diversity of people, each with a story to tell. Families and individuals, the devout and the curious, pickpockets and vendors, are all part of the experience. Moreover, these people will present travellers with opportunities to see things anew. Things are seldom as we perceive them to be. Years ago, for example, in bringing a group of students to Europe, I heard one of them point to a group of Europeans near a restaurant we passed and exclaim 'Look at all those foreigners!' To which I responded, 'Foreigners? We're the foreigners!'

Lastly, pilgrims have a choice as to how they relate to the group they travel with. Ideally, travellers experience a common bond among themselves based on the unifying experience of the pilgrimage. Yet constraints of time, as well as individual desires to have more time at a favourite spot during the trip, for example, can cause friction and problems in a group. So often, the trouble we pass through is of our own making, and the 'monsters' we encounter have been put together by our own follies and machinations.¹⁷ Learning how to transcend hostility and live hospitably, as on a pilgrimage, is a tension through which personal horizons may expand.

Recognition: opening the eyes

It is at the point when the stranger 'breaks bread' with the disciples in Luke's story that their eyes are opened and they recognize their guest (24:30–31). Since 'breaking bread' is a common New Testament expression for the Lord's Supper, we can deduce that Luke is employing this story to instruct his community, some of whom may have lost their hope. Thus, he shows them that it is at the Lord's table that the Lord will be seen. Moreover, it is only those who open their table to others and share their possessions and who take on the self-giving attitude of Jesus, who will recognize the risen Lord and be re-established in hope.¹⁸ Perhaps this is where the genius of pilgrimage lies. For at the dawn of the twenty-first century we are becoming more and more aware of how small our world really is and how important it is to connect with others. Pilgrimage gives us an opportunity to do so.

[It] mirrors not only the most basic reality of the church, the people of God on the pilgrimage of life, but even more so the reality of humanity itself, human beings together on the way to the mysterious beyond. Something of this mysterious beyond of humanity can be seen and experienced within the pilgrimage. The peaceful and harmonious mixture of peoples from all classes, ethnicities and races which gather together at the pilgrimage site can certainly be an image and foretaste of the ideal humanity of the future, one which is already beginning, but usually in much turmoil, conflict, resistance and even bloodshed: the multi-racial and multi-cultural reality of today's world.¹⁹

It is a matter of seeing. Thus, as Christians travel, they are given the chance to move from seeing things in a superficial and merely intellectual way and to enter into their experience in a manner that will enable them to become a part of what they are seeing. They will move from focusing on sites to seeing people, and they will learn in the process how 'to discern the body'. Pilgrims who take pictures, for example, illustrate this truth quite literally, for more often than not, they move from taking pictures of places to taking photos of people.

Years ago, the Canadian theologian Gregory Baum wrote that men and women come 'to be' through dialogue and communion, deepening themselves through responding to the experiences and people in their lives. 'What is given to us at the beginning', he said,

'is to be a listener and our lives are the realization of our dialogue with others.'²⁰ Sometimes the words addressed to us may be a challenge and we may have to move away from self-centredness and move to the wider reality of life and people.

There are [also] moments when the word addressed to us makes us abandon the world of our own making and enter upon new life. Dialogue is not simply a way of giving and receiving information; it does not change people simply by expanding their knowledge. Again and again as we are in dialogue with others, we must hear the painful word which overcomes us and evokes a response in us that transforms life. The word addressed to us at these moments reveals to us the truth of which we are afraid. It pierces the screen we have erected between ourselves and reality. Then we must either flee from this word and hide more effectively behind our defenses, or open ourselves to it, go through the painful passage from superficiality to greater depth, and receive the truth that has been uttered to us. Sometimes dialogue is a happy sharing; but in the course of a person's life there are important and yet frequent moments when dialogue means conversion.²¹

The dialogue of travel is an experience of conversion. Luke's disciples, for example, are changed by their travel and they discover that their real journey was not to Emmaus but to their own hearts. It began when the stranger joined them. Because they listened, they were able to let go of the little world of their own making, and they came to see things in a new way. In fact, they said to each other: 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?' (24:32). Pilgrims tread this same journey experience.

Return to the place of challenge

Luke tells us that when the disciples recognized who their table companion was, 'they immediately got up and returned to Jerusalem' (24:33), to the very place they had left. Imagine them leaving Jerusalem the first time, heads bent and spirits sagging, and returning to the same place soon after, standing tall and ready for the struggles to come. A listening encounter with a stranger emboldened them.

Pilgrims, too, will go home again, home to the place of everyday life and challenge, but they will never be at home in the same way. Travelling has given them a chance to go out of themselves, to see

things differently, become purified, and to expand their world-view. Thus, they will return to the same place they left but more open-hearted. Like Luke's disciples, however, they will have no real knowledge of where their new insights might lead them, but listening to encounters with fellow travellers and the people they have 'seen' will embolden them.

The millennium is near. It offers a new way of being. Greece, Turkey, Rome, Assisi, Oberammergau, the Holy Land, Marian shrines – travelling to such places is one way of getting there.

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NOTES

1 Interestingly, Virgil Elizondo, 'Pilgrimage: an enduring ritual of humanity' in Virgil Elizondo and Sean Freyne (eds), *Pilgrimage* (London: SCM Press, 1996), p ix, reports that although there is no church mandate which prescribes pilgrimages, the number of people going on pilgrimages seems to increase at the same time as attendance at church-mandated services continues to decline.

2 A. Stewart (trans), *Itinerary from Bordeaux to Jerusalem* (London: Palestine Pilgrims Text Society, 1887).

3 The anthropologist Victor Turner talks about this process in a similar way and shows through widespread data on pilgrimages that almost all of them conform in some way to three developmental stages: separation from the status quo, passage through a threshold, and regeneration and a return to social responsibility. Cf David Carrasco, 'Those who go on a sacred journey: the shapes and diversity of pilgrimages' in Elizondo and Freyne (eds), *Pilgrimage*, pp 14–17.

4 John Heagle, *Our journey toward God* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1977), p 80.

5 Philo of Alexandria, *Spec. Leg.* 1.69–70 in *On the Decalogue, on the Special Laws*, vol 7, trans F. H. Colson (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1937).

6 A recent travel brochure to the Holy Land illustrates this point, suggesting that among the benefits of a trip to the lands of the Bible are an increase in Bible literacy, the revival of the spiritual dimensions of faith, the enhancement of life, the creation of Christian bonds, and the starving out of loneliness.

7 Michael Prior, 'Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, yesterday and today', quoting M. Eliade, *Patterns in comparative religion* (London/New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p 368 in *Christians in the Holy Land* (London: The World of Islam Festival Trust, 1994), p 173.

8 Elizondo, 'Pilgrimage: an enduring ritual of humanity', p viii.

9 Prior, *Christians in the Holy Land*, p 174, asserts: 'One can see represented very clearly Hadrian's *Cardo Maximus*, and in a prominent position at the center on the west of the street the steps leading up to Constantine's basilica. Even the three doorways mentioned by Eusebius can be seen readily. The prominent position given to Jerusalem in the *Madaba Map* confirms the tradition which was developing within the Christian faithful, that Jerusalem was the centre of the world, and that whereas the Jews in the past had focused their attention on the temple, so now Christians focused on the Hill of Golgotha.'

10 Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee according to the fifth gospel* (Rosh Pina: Corazin, 1992).

11 Virgil Elizondo, 'Pastoral opportunities of pilgrimages' in Elizondo and Freyne (eds), *Pilgrimage*, p 109.

12 Louise Perrotta, 'Pilgrim at the tomb' in *God's Word Today* (March 1997), p 43.

13 Glenn Bowman, 'Contemporary Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land' in Anthony O'Mahony, Goran Gunner and Kevork Hintlian (eds), *The Christian heritage in the Holy Land* (Cavendish: Scorpion, 1995), p 304.

14 These include: the Church of All Nations (Gethsemane), Shepherds' Field (Bethlehem), the Church of the Flagellation, Lazarus' Tomb, Dominus Flevit, Ein Kerem and Mount Tabor.

15 Heagle, *Our journey toward God*, p 81.

16 Leslie J. Hoppe OFM, *The lands of the Bible* (Pulaski, Wisconsin, 1995), p 2.

17 Alan W. Jones, *Journey into Christ* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), p 17.

18 Eugene La Verdière SSS, *Luke*, New Testament Message 5 (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1980), pp 287-288.

19 Elizondo, 'Pilgrimage; an enduring ritual of humanity', p viii.

20 Gregory Baum, *Man becoming: God in secular experience* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), pp 41-60.

21 Baum, *Man becoming*, p 43.