

May 2023: Pilgrimage

Early this year, Richard and I treated ourselves to the guidebooks for the Peak Pilgrimage and the Hope Pilgrimage, two local pilgrimage walks visiting churches in Peak District, from Ilam to Eyam and from Edale to Eyam. We love exploring churches anyway, and these pilgrimages give us an excellent excuse for doing so. Now all we've got to do is find the time to do the walking, in short enough stints that our elderly dog can manage it!

Pilgrimages have featured in Christianity throughout Christian history, and they are growing in popularity today. Many, Christians and others, are rediscovering the pleasures and the benefits of slowing life to a walking pace, even if only for a while. Apart from the religious or spiritual element, a key feature of a pilgrimage is that the focus is on the travelling, rather than on the arriving. The Peak Pilgrimage has 13 churches to visit, and the Hope Pilgrimage has 9, though Eyam church is on both routes. But visiting the churches and collecting the stamps and verses isn't the only aim – if were, you could complete both routes by car in an afternoon.

Travelling anywhere at walking pace encourages a focus on the present moment; if it rains, we get wet. If we are hungry, we only have what we have carried with us; anything else is as far away as it takes us to walk to the next village, and only then if there is a shop there. At its simplest level, that can help us appreciate the blessings we have; such as a waterproof, or a snack, or the physical ability to walk from here to there. But on a pilgrimage, distinct from just a walk, we may also actively focus on the here and now. We may deliberately seek to appreciate things that we often don't notice as we rush around in our busy, hurried, lives; the song of a bird, the play of light on the scenery, the feel of the wind on our face or the path under our feet.

Traditionally, Christian pilgrims undertook their journeys as a way of deliberately seeking to draw closer to God. There were, and are, as many ways of doing that as there are pilgrims. For some, it may be through connecting with the natural world, or the history of places travelled through; though prayer prompted by the surroundings; or focusing on what we are grateful for, or on things that are concerning us. For me, it will probably be all of these, at different times. My prayer for us all is that, in whatever way works for us, we will all find time to focus on whatever it is that puts us in touch with our deepest being, whatever most enables us to become more the person we were created to be.

Yours in Christ,
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