

In the short time that I have been in Aylesford, I have become very aware that our beautiful church stands on the ancient route of pilgrimage between Winchester and Canterbury. The Pilgrim's way, passes right through our parish, and even today, many individuals call at this Church as a place of rest and reflection on their journey.

Pilgrimage is an ancient custom, of course. Pilgrims have walked the Pilgrim's Way and other routes since, Middle Ages, going to Rochester or Canterbury, or even heading to the channel ports at the beginning of longer journeys to Compostela or Jerusalem.

Pilgrimage isn't just a feature of Christianity either. Muslims make pilgrimage to Mecca, Hindus to the Ganges, and long ago our pre-Christian forebears seem to have headed for places like Stonehenge at significant moments too. (As some did on Wednesday last week for the Summer Solstice).

There's probably always been an element of simple fun and curiosity about pilgrimage - an excuse for a change of scene and a break from routine - but for most who make these sacred journeys there is much more to them than that. True pilgrimage is about the journey itself; what you learn on the way about ourselves, about our fellow pilgrims and about God. It's been said that a pilgrimage is "a journey in search of itself" - we have to make it to find out what it is about, and sometimes it's not until afterwards, looking back, that we see its significance. The power of pilgrimage is that, in some sense it is a symbol of life itself. It is a reminder that the whole of life is a pilgrimage.

We are all pilgrims, on a journey through our lives, finding the way, losing the way, coming to turning points and forks in the road, sometimes walking through the sunlit uplands, sometimes battling grimly through mud and rain, enjoying the company of our fellow travellers, or feeling at odds with them, yet knowing we all somehow need each other.

Our Patron Saints, Peter and Paul, travelled great distances themselves, not only physically, taking the Gospel out into the world, but spiritually as well. Their lives were pilgrimages which took them along very different routes as they journeyed with God. For each of them, it was a journey in which they discovered much about themselves and the God who they sought to love and serve. It was a journey that brought about significant changes in their lives - symbolised by their change of name - Saul became Paul and Simon becoming Peter. It was a journey that led them to give their lives.

St Paul's faith journey was dramatic and unexpected. In one of his letters he writes: *"I am the least of the apostles"* - the least of those sent out to proclaim the good news of Christ - *"because I persecuted the church of God."* He had started out bitterly opposed to Jesus and his followers. He didn't change his mind until he was struck down, dramatically, on the road to Damascus, where he was heading to root out and arrest members of the church... He was the last person anyone could have imagined becoming a Christian, but the fact that the community he'd once persecuted accepted, loved and forgave him transformed him completely. There is a lot in his writings about forgiveness, inclusion and the breaking down of barriers - he preached this message because he knew its truth and power from his own experience of life.

Peter's pilgrimage of faith was different, in some ways less dramatic, a more gradual process.

Simon was his birth name, and it's the name he is often called in many of the Gospel accounts. In the stories in Luke's Gospel, we are told that when Jesus arrived in Capernaum, Simon's home town, by the side of the sea of Galilee, he made quite an impact at the Synagogue, healing a man possessed by demons. We don't know if Simon was present - but straight afterwards Jesus headed for Simon's house - we're not told why. And when he got there he discovered that he had walked right into the middle of a crisis. Simon's mother in law was ill with a fever. With one word from Jesus, though, the fever abated, and she was healed. Again, we don't know whether Simon was present - he's not mentioned. If he was there, he was in the background, apparently saying and doing nothing.

Jesus went on with his mission, healing and preaching, and at some point, perhaps days later, maybe weeks, he came back to the shore at Capernaum. A great crowd gathered around him, but again, Simon wasn't one of them. He was nearby, mending his nets, but seeming to take no notice of what was going on, until Jesus asked to borrow his boat. Even when Jesus suggested directly to him, after the crowds had gone, that he put out into deep waters to let down his nets again, Simon was politely sceptical. Simon didn't mind humouring him - but he didn't expect anything to come of it. What did a carpenter from Nazareth, 20 miles inland, know about fishing?

To Simon's utter amazement, the nets were filled to bursting point. Simon had never seen anything like it.

This is the moment when it finally sinks into Simon's heart that Jesus is not only a man with a message, but also a man with a message for him.

This demonstration of the generosity of God touched something deep in Simon. - At that moment, he discovers a God who gives him more than he can ask or imagine, just as he is. At first, Simon falls to his knees and begs Jesus to leave him - a common reaction in the Bible when people realise they are in the presence of someone or something holy. But Jesus takes no notice, and far from going away, he calls Simon to follow him, and later in the Gospels calls him to lead the church too. Simon finally came to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, and became Peter, a rock that Jesus used in the building of the Church.

The pilgrimages of Peter and Paul - their journeys through life - are very different . One starts from a position of indifference and apathy, and the other starting from fanaticism and bitter hatred. Paul is suddenly turned around by God, but Peter's change of direction is a gradual one.

It's good to have these two very different stories to reflect on. I wonder which is more like our own? We are each here today, because something has drawn us here, but what is it? If we could draw a map that described our pilgrimage to this point, what would it look like? One thing is certain, each of our maps would be different.

Maybe it would be a dead straight line, with never a doubt, never a question - not many are like that, but if that's yours then that's fine.

Maybe you have gone along every diversion and back alley possible and are amazed to find yourself here at all.

Maybe you've gone backwards and forwards on the path - coming and going.

Maybe you have very deliberately walked away at some point, and then come back again.

Maybe you are hovering at the entrance, on the way in, or tempted to leave.

Maybe you are at a fork in the road, aware of a nagging sense that God is calling you in a new direction.

Our journeys through life are very rarely neat straight lines. Even if we think we know where we are going, and think we can imagine the route ahead, the future can't be mapped and predicted precisely. All we can do is listen for the voice of God, as we travel, and trust that however unlikely the path looks, he will be with us on it... And where God is, there will always be blessing, there will always be love as abundant as the fish which filled Peter's nets, and forgiveness as freely given as that which Paul found.

That's good news for all of us in our individual pilgrimages thorough life, and good news for us as a nation at this time of change and turbulence. Let's make sure that wherever the path leads us, we look for God's presence, so that we can in turn bring the good news of Christ to all those with whom we share our earthly pilgrimage, by giving of ourselves in love and service.

Amen