

Contemporary Pilgrimage: What is it?

I have been asked many times what makes a walk a pilgrimage? The essence of pilgrimage coalesces around three elements:

- An intention to disengage from the dominant culture.
- Attentiveness to being transformed by nature and the Divine.
- An affection for the earth and all its inhabitants including the self.

The simple rhythm of walking, eating and sleeping can create spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing not just for the individual but for the community that the pilgrim returns to. A pilgrim will always bring back to their community the gifts and insights they have gleaned from the path.

To go on pilgrimage connects with self, earth and, for some, the Divine, whilst disconnecting from the busy, digital world, of consumerism. As Walter Brueggemann explains in his commentary on Genesis to disengage from the culture around you for the sake of faith or spiritual development makes you a sojourner; *'This is a sophisticated theological motivation for sojourning'*. In the case of Jacob in the Book of Genesis, the disengagement means he becomes present to the promise and the blessing given first of all to Abraham and Sarah. Jacob's sojourning leads to two encounters with God: a ladder connecting heaven and earth with angels descending and ascending and a, down in the mud, wrestling with God.

An acknowledgement of being lost, of being bereaved, of being overwhelmed by the world, of being separated from the good, the higher self or God is a clear motivation for many in becoming a pilgrim. Mere acknowledgement of pain and alienation can lead us by the hand along a path of healing.

For others there is a sense that we have lost our capacity for awe, a sense of awe that can be caught up in the divine presence. We might think of the intrinsic awe experienced beneath an oak tree in a storm or something like the awe of Moses before the burning bush. Both occur on holy ground and then it's time to throw off those walking boots and dance. Pilgrimage can also facilitate the need to mark time or to slow time down in the busyness of a distracted world. A need to find yourself again by walking into wholeness. Pilgrimage can help to re-orientate and reset when life is chaotic or out of sync.

To be a pilgrim is to go wayfaring with the grain of divine wisdom found in creation. A distillation into essence and a vow of frugality where the outer reflects the inner. A fork in the path, a steep ascent and getting lost mirror challenging or transitional aspects of our lives. A dip in a river on a hot day, a view gazed upon with love and the balm of silence mirror the joyous life.

Attention to all of these aspects of pilgrimage deepens our sense making.