Border Crossings

During my sabbatical in 2021, my husband and I spent a week walking the South Downs Way. The route is 100 miles and runs from Winchester to Eastbourne. We walked carrying our tent, sleeping bags and provisions for the week, so whilst the daily mileage wasn't excessive (12-19 miles each day), the weight-carrying certainly made it a physical challenge. Pilgrimage or long-distance walking has become an increasingly popular cultural phenomenon, whether it is people walking the Camino de Santiago, or the numerous pilgrim routes promoted by the British Pilgrimage Trust. I imagine that many of you have undertaken some sort of pilgrimage. The British Pilgrimage Trust have re-crafted the definition of pilgrimage to appeal to a secular age, encouraging people to bring their own beliefs, and advancing British pilgrimage as a form of cultural heritage that promotes holistic wellbeing, accessible to all. Writing about long-distance walking is also popular, with Raynor Winn's popular *The Salt Path* being made into a film (she walks the southwest coast path with her husband after they lose their farm and are made homeless and penniless); and Robert MacFarlane (major contemporary nature writer) reflecting regularly on his long-distance walks.

He writes in *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot (pg.78):*

> "We lack - we need - a term for those places where one experiences a 'transition' from a known landscape onto John's 'far side of the moon', into Hudson's 'new country', into Berry's 'another world'; somewhere where we feel and think significantly differently. I have for some time been imagining such transitions as 'border-crossings'."

Border-crossings are something that religions habitually explore. We have different ways of talking about a transition from security and the familiar *into the* familiar and strange where reliance on God becomes the norm. Think of the Exodus and the 40 year pilgrimage in the wilderness.

The magi's journey is a type of border crossing as well as being the *first* Christian pilgrimage. They walked into a different story, into a different religion in the making, coming from elsewhere, strangers from a different land. Nonetheless, they were able to receive the new revelation of God, to greet it with joy and honour its truth. They embody, in our Biblical heritage, the wise stranger. A tradition that begins with the visit of the Lord, or the three angels, to Abraham and Sarah, by the oaks of mamre.

These strangers are not needy strangers, they do not come asking for anything, they come to offer something of value. Here the uninvited guest is the provocateur, leaving the established, settled homemakers with a feeling of being unsettled or challenged by the visitors. The visitors cross the border threshold of familiar domesticity and make the familiar strange. The magi leave gold, frankincense and myrrh – gifts that symbolize Jesus' future, his vocation. Gold represents divinity and royalty, while frankincense symbolizes prayer and worship. Myrrh signifies sacrifice and suffering, foreshadowing Jesus' death on the cross. Yet these gifts would have made little sense at the time.

Except Mary and Joseph were not unfamiliar with border crossings, they had already crossed many borders in their journey with God. Their pilgrimage began with the invitation of the angel and continued with their own journey on foot to

Bethlehem. Here they were in an unfamiliar town with a newborn and uninvited visitors dropping in with gifts.

The long-distance walk that Olav and I undertook offered the opportunity to cross a metaphorical border. I deliberately chose a walk that wasn't a Christian pilgrim route -wanting to see where God was at work in previously unlabelled places. The process itself of walking, the added burden of the physical weight on our backs, meant that much of the day was taken up with physical concerns: can I tighten the backpack, so the weight is carried slightly differently to ease the pain on my hips? Do we have enough water and when can we next fill up our bottles? Where can we get supplies for tomorrow's picnic? Can I take much more of this pain in my feet and legs? The immediate concerns of day-to-day survival were our chief concerns, but might this not preclude spiritual reflection?[1] Don't we need silence, a clear diary, our daily needs taken care of?

Alternatively, such practical concerns might be the meat of spiritual growth. If spiritual thoughts belong to the realm of satisfied living, what of the lives of millions who experience daily vulnerability and struggle for survival? Are their lives, by definition, devoid of the possibility of encounter with God? Helpfully, there is another tradition to draw on. Brueggemann, in his theological discussion of the role of the 'land' in the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh, locates spiritual development, not in the settled comfort of land ownership but rather in the rigours of wilderness living, in the very experience of exodus. He writes:

[1] See, for example, Thompson, Thompson and Pattison (2008), pg.9 on the need for rest and security as a pre-requisite for the sort of thinking that theological reflection requires.

> "In the wilderness Yahweh provides (cf. Gen. 22:14) when there seems to be no available provision. Life is rooted in impossibility. Landlessness is a condition in which the land promiser sustains his people. The surprise of manna, the unexpectedness of quail, the surging of water, all are hints of the real miracle of landlessness. There in Yahweh's presence, life-giving resources are adequate, not too much, but not too little." (Brueggemann, 2017, p.44).

By virtue of the fact that we could only take what could be carried, we *had* to travel light. Our physical exertion in the day and the early sunset meant we went to bed early and arose with the sunlight. Our lives were stripped back to simple things: walking the route, ensuring we had food and water, following the map, getting to the next campsite. Such a journey had just a bit of risk involved, and it left us more open to the unexpected. One night, for instance, we stayed in an eccentric woman's back garden, where we were invited in for tea and political conversation: Brexit, the environment, proportional representation and farming were all part of the discussion. Such a rich encounter with strangers cannot be bought but is truly an unexpected gift amid the journey: 'The surprise of manna, the unexpectedness of quail' - we drank unpasteurized milk and set off with saffron bread sandwiches.

This long-distance walk - a pilgrimage away from settled existence, from routines of comfort and security - led to encounters with strangers. Along the way, what was given and received became not just what we could provide for ourselves, but what others could give us. Spiritually speaking, being willing to receive is a

condition for welcoming the Holy Spirit into our lives, whether that is through hands outstretched to receive the bread of communion, or hearts open in prayer.

Epiphany ἐπιφαίνω (epiphainō) means to appear to, or to shine upon and Epiphany is the festival that celebrates the appearance or shining of God to the gentiles. Real encounters with God I suggest are those which are precisely strange and somewhat unsettling – why angels have to say so regularly 'do not be afraid' to those they come to speak with. We have to cross borders to see God and encounter God.

Perhaps this Epiphany celebration is an invitation to consider our journey with God as requiring border crossings. And traditionally at Epiphany we mark the thresholds of our homes and churches with a sign that recalls the journey of the magi. The year of the Lord 2025 and the names Caspar Melchior Balthasar.

Each time we cross these thresholds we can be reminded of the ways in which God breaks into our lives with new hope and joy.

Rev'd Imogen

Epiphany 2024